

PLAIN TRUTH
METHODIST ESSENTIALS
IN MODERN IDIOM

ROBERT E. ROBERTS, D.D.

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**PLAIN TRUTH
METHODIST ESSENTIALS IN MODERN
IDIOM**

By the Same Author

THE THEOLOGY OF TERTULLIAN

WE GO IN QUEST

THE PRESENT MESSAGE OF THE PARABLES

THE HAPPY HEART

PLAIN TRUTH

METHODIST ESSENTIALS IN MODERN
IDIOM

BY

ROBERT E. ROBERTS, D.D. (LOND.)

'I design plain truth for plain people'—JOHN WESLEY.

THE EPWORTH PRESS

(EDGAR C. BARTON)

25-35 CITY ROAD, LONDON, E.C.1

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First published in 1937

BX 8332
.R58



Made in Great Britain

Dw. Pur.

1570683

TO CHARLES ENSOR WALTERS

THE PRESIDENT OF THE CONFERENCE

(1936-37)



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'Our Church does not express a dull formalism. Like red-hot steel, it adapts itself to the channels through which it flows, and moulds itself to meet the needs of each new age. Its spirit remains the same.'

C. ENSOR WALTERS,
The President's New Year Message

INTRODUCTION

'I now write, as I generally speak, ad populum—to the bulk of mankind, to those who neither relish nor understand the art of speaking; but who, notwithstanding, are competent judges of those truths which are necessary to present and future happiness. . . . I design plain truth for plain people.'

JOHN WESLEY—Preface to Sermons

INTRODUCTION

'THE dexterous Capuchins', says Lord Macaulay, 'never choose to preach on the life and miracles of a saint, until they have awakened the devotional feelings of their auditors by exhibiting some relic of him, a thread of his garment, a lock of his hair, or a drop of his blood.' I have, by way of experiment, held a lock of John Wesley's hair before the eyes of my audience, when essaying to speak of him and his work. The psychological effect certainly testifies to the fitness of Macaulay's application of the adjective 'dexterous' to the astute friars. While it is not possible to perform such an experiment for one's readers, we may rejoice to realize that the same underlying principle serves our purpose in the approach of the bi-centenary of the experience of the 'warmed heart'. We are all interested in, and prepared to discover the meaning of an event which was fraught with such momentous consequences to the world, and ready to recover for ourselves something of its rapture.

But such stimulation of our interest will fail of its full fruition unless we can surmount the obstacle presented by the language and forms of thought of another age. We must rescue the essential ideas of Wesley from the remote terminology in which they are imprisoned and state them in the ordinary everyday language of our time if we are to secure his design of 'plain truth for plain people'. We may fear that Methodism will not be Methodism unless it is couched in the old speech

and long-accredited thought-forms, but experience will teach us that we can carry over the spirit of Methodism, without any loss, and find that, in fact, it takes on a new lease of life.

The translation of the whole Methodist evangel is of necessity the work of the entire Methodist Church, and the growth and influence of that Church is a testimony to the enthusiasm and energy with which it has addressed itself to the task. The movement, however, lags at this one point. For the want of some definite attempt to translate such terms as 'Justification by Faith' and 'The Witness of our own Spirit' into words which convey a vivid meaning to our own time, we miss the rich and living content of the Methodist message, and satisfy ourselves with the generalities of a vague and undefined Christianity. To recover that content is our task and it must be fulfilled within that wider operation, that broader transformation, which has taken place. Hence we may with profit look at the outlines of the broader transformation, frankly recognizing the different temper and outlook, which, to succeeding generations make the same thing appear to be different, and different things to be the same.

The early Methodists were conspicuous for their unworldliness. They rejoiced in the thought that they stood apart, every man a marked man. They were like wild animals drawn from their native surroundings and domiciled in a zoological garden. Their conspicuousness was their glory and the oftener they were seen the happier they were. The modern Methodist remains in the world, though not of it, so that his witness does not hit the eye in the same way. Like the wild animal in its native haunts, he thrives by reason of his resem-

blance to his environment. But it is easy to miss the subtle significance of this apparent camouflage. A man may more effectively witness to the saving power of the cross of Christ than by dangling a gold cross from his watch-chain, as though he were saying, 'This is a specimen of the species Christian, Class A'. He may look more like the people around him and yet be essentially different. As Robert Louis Stevenson says, 'You can see him in the street and you can count his buttons' (nothing is said there about a gold cross), 'but heaven knows in what he prides himself! Heaven knows where he has set his treasure!'

There is a significant passage in Miss Rebecca West's *A Thinking Reed*. She says: 'Yet she remembered quite well that she had seen him at certain moments when his vision burned dark, hating their circumstances as much as she did. But on his face, as on the faces of all the men she knew who had power over the immediate world, there lay an expression of acquiescence in what was going on around him, which was dissociated from the findings of the critical brain behind, yet was not exactly insincere. It was as if vigorous personalities found they could get their own way better by pretending that they had none other than the common will. So animals, who must go about the jungle unnoticed if they are to survive, assume protective colouring, and stand among the dappled leaves, dappled leaves themselves.' The whole significance of that is, that the animals assume the appearance of dappled leaves, just because they are *not* dappled leaves. And men of vigorous spiritual vitality assume the appearance of unspiritual people around them because so they can give their best service.

I remember one November day walking down my garden, when my attention was caught by a dead twig on a tree. It suddenly appeared to move by its own volition. There was no breeze or other discernible cause. A close examination revealed the fact that it was not a twig at all, but a caterpillar so like a twig, that, except for the fact that it moved, it could not be distinguished by the naked eye from a bit of dead wood. What fun the old boy must have had in the inwardness of his knowledge that even when he stood among inert twigs, so similar to them that a sparrow might have chosen him for a foothold, he was a warm living thing! And what a delight when the mood was on him to twist, and turn, and stretch, to feel the warmth of the sun on his back, to uncurl his feet, and to feed to the full on the luscious bark of the plum-tree!

In some such way your modern Methodist stands within and yet apart from the environment of his day. You may see him—shades of John Wesley!—sitting among the Cabinet Ministers at Westminster, but not by a flicker of the eyelid does his expression differ from that of his compeers, not by the design of his collar or the cut of his coat will he be distinguishable as a Methodist. But meet him at a Central Hall Anniversary, or a Chapel Stonelaying, or even an Education Committee and you will soon learn in what company he likes to shake a loose leg, you will discover what a warm heart beats within that stolid breast. You will see his face light up as he sings Charles Wesley's hymns, and unless you are undiscerning indeed you will know what is the source of his inspiration. You will know that, behind the apparent acceptance of what is going

on around him day by day, there is an alert critical brain and a warm religious faith that will use to the utmost its resources of life to enrich the world in which he moves; a dappled leaf among dappled leaves, and yet something immeasurably more.

You may see your modern Methodist in humbler surroundings and less ambitious company. You will see her (and how often it is a 'her') running a household with its unending grind. And again neither the style of her 'perm' nor the colour of her overall will tell you that she is a Methodist wife and mother. But wait until her busy hands take up the garment she is making for the Sewing Meeting (a garment, I ween, far less discreet than her mother's), or go with her to the Mothers' Meeting, or follow her to the service at her beloved church, and you will quickly discover where she has laid up her treasure. You will understand why she accepts so willingly what is transpiring around her in the lives of her friends and neighbours—and especially of her children. She knows the futility of precepts and their lure. 'Precepts', says Richard King, 'are so much easier to give than example, and there is a kind of "bouquet of flowers" about delivering them which is distinctly gratifying, even if you only present it to yourself. As a matter of fact, I believe that the only moral lessons young people ever do learn are the moral lessons of example. The rest leaves them cold, or merely bores them.' This woman knows that, and behind the quiet acceptance of much that is uncongenial to her spirit is a mind alert, and a heart fervent to serve the present age as well as to save her own undying soul. Once more a dappled leaf among dappled leaves, yet so much more.

These and a thousand thousand of their kind abundantly fulfil Charles Wesley's prayer

O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer's praise.

The fervour and spontaneity of Methodist worship seems strangely unnecessary to worshippers who belong to other religious communities, and it is worth while asking for the source of this flood of enthusiasm which has continued to pour down the years. John Wesley thought it incumbent upon him to preach a sermon on *The Nature of Enthusiasm*. 'It is true', he says, 'there is a sort of religion, nay and it is called Christianity too, which may be preached without any such imputation, which is generally allowed to be consistent with common sense—that is a religion of form, a round of outward duties, performed in a decent, regular manner. You may add orthodoxy thereto, a system of right opinions, yea and some quantity of heathen morality; and yet not many people will pronounce that "much religion hath made you mad". But if you aim at the religion of the heart, if you talk of "righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost" then it will not be long before your sentence is passed, "Thou art beside thyself".'

What is summed up in the scriptural phrase as 'righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost', and in the characteristically Methodist phrase 'religion of the heart', is a whole realm of ideas familiarly known to our fathers as 'Justification by Faith', 'The Witness of the Spirit', 'The New Birth', 'The Witness of our own Spirit', 'Adoption', 'The Fruits of the Spirit', and 'Christian Perfection'. A whole evangel is there

as in a nutshell. When it was first proclaimed such titles conveyed a vivid message to all who heard. To the initiated they still stand for something real and satisfying. But they are 'caviare to the general'. When as a youngster I read Milton, the classical allusions often baffled me, and I envied the man who moved so familiarly among the denizens of the ancient world that their names flew to his lips, and their exploits were cited to illustrate and clarify what to me was more familiar in my native tongue, and in the history of my own people. I can well recall with gratitude the offices of a kindly teacher who explained to me allusions that to a better instructed person were themselves explanations. I was relieved to find that I was reading of things which were vital to me but which Milton was setting forth in language that was unfamiliar.

Some such experience is shared by those who have recourse to the writings of John Wesley and his contemporaries, or who listen to preachers who talk in the jargon of bygone days. It is the purpose of the following chapters to show that when we extract the essence of the doctrines of Methodism, and state the meaning of those doctrines in the language of our everyday life, it still has the authentic note of that 'good news' which never grows old.

I

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

‘Thou ungodly one, who hearest or readest these words! thou vile, helpless, miserable sinner! I charge thee before God the Judge of all, go straight unto Him, with all thy ungodliness. Take heed thou destroy not thy own soul by pleading thy righteousness, more or less. Go as altogether ungodly, guilty, lost, destroyed, deserving and dropping into hell; and then thou shalt find favour in His sight, and know that He justifieth the ungodly. As such thou shalt be brought unto the blood of sprinkling, as an undone, helpless, damned sinner. Thus look unto Jesus. There is the Lamb of God, who taketh away thy sins.’

JOHN WESLEY. Sermon on ‘Justification by Faith’

I

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

IN his essay *Virginibus Puerisque* Robert Louis Stevenson tells of a young man who was confiding to him the sweet story of his love. 'I like it well enough as long as her sisters are there,' said this amorous swain, 'but I don't know what to do when we're alone'; and thereby he reveals how unequal he is to one of the major propositions of life. If he has to depend on his girl's sisters to keep the conversational ball rolling at this stage he hasn't much chance of being anything but ill-at-ease throughout his life. If he does not put himself on right terms now, he cannot hope for much happiness later on.

Yet the attitude of that young man is the attitude of countless people who move through life without taking themselves in hand and facing up to what life requires of them. Life demands three major adjustments—to the world in which we live, to the people who share it with us, and to God. Each of those adjustments brings its own assurance of well-being, its own joy, and no full satisfying life can be experienced except where the threefold attunement is made. For the moment, we are concerned with this, that putting things right between ourselves and God is an essential condition of a satisfactory life. It may as well be put bluntly here at once that it is not enough to enjoy being in God's company when other people are there. We need to be

at ease with Him when we are alone. It is one thing to feel that we can pass muster with the crowd, and to sing of our luck in being in the assemblies of the saints or to bemoan the devices and desires of our wicked hearts in the company of well-dressed and ultra-respectable sinners. It is another thing to share with God the silent and solitary hour! But this thing has to be settled between ourselves and God so that we fly to Him more readily than to some trusted friend or sympathetic neighbour; so that we turn to Him without embarrassment and live in His presence without fear.

Life affords no complete satisfaction until we have faced up to and settled everything between ourselves and God. I say complete satisfaction advisedly, because no good purpose is served by denying that people can and do get a vigorous 'kick' out of life by living in accord with the physical laws of the world and in harmony with their fellow-men. A good deal of that accord can be attained without recognizing our personal relation to God. That is why you meet so many irreligious 'good sports'. Perhaps that is why your neighbour who cultivates his garden on Sunday lends you his lawn-mower on Monday with a better grace than the man who sits next you in Church but hasn't quite got the hang of what neighbourliness means; and that is why your fellow-employee at the office is so much easier to get on with, though he is no saint, than the other fellow who is a diligent church-goer but hasn't mastered his social harmonies. That is why, too, the man who has learnt not to sow hurry and reap indigestion is so much more pleasant to contemplate, though he is no saint, than the saint who attends the prayer-

meeting with a walking-stick in his hand and sciatica in his leg. John Wesley described such goodness as 'heathen goodness' and so, in a sense, it is. It does not denote a proper relation to God though it may indicate an excellent adaptation in the world of men and things. Many a devoted child of God could learn a profitable lesson or two in the way of diet and physical culture, and in the realm of social neighbourliness, from those who own no higher allegiance than the obligation to live at peace with their neighbours and surroundings: 'For the sons of this world are for their own generation wiser than the sons of light.'

Still the saint does score where the sinner is 'out for a duck'. For one thing, he is not afraid to be alone. Like the famous Greta, he rather rejoices in it. He does not need to be always in the company of people who will save him from his own thoughts. He is not afraid to look at himself fore and aft, past, present and future. That subconscious self, which is reputed to be a sort of nightmarish Bedlam out of which, at any moment hobgoblins and demons and fiends may emerge and send your courage oozing through the soles of your boots, is to him no more alarming than the stage of a pantomime with its quaint creatures. So he has no need of repressions. Where the sinner wears his spirit to ribbons in the frantic effort to keep the memory of his sins from mocking his desire for peace, the saint bids memory awake and exercise its skill, for the greater the sin the greater the forgiveness.

For another thing, none of the commonly accepted affrights have any effect upon him. Neither dismal stories nor reputed perils can touch him.

Who so beset him round
 With dismal stories,
 Do but themselves confound;
 His strength the more is.
 No lion can him fright,
 He'll with a giant fight,
 But he will have a right
 To be a pilgrim.

He has no fear of men and, what is more, no fear of God. Neither in life nor in death is he afraid to look God in the face. 'Our people die well,' said Wesley. The Christian has no need to resort to any subterfuges, such as the suggestion that God is too great or too busy to notice his delinquencies, or that God is too mild or too indifferent to mind whether he is good or not. He takes God for what He is, acknowledging that there is no hiding from Him, no fleeing from His presence, and no presuming upon His laxity; yet he looks Him confidently in the face.

Nor have we finished with his score yet. His adjustment to God often enables him to triumph over maladjustments in the realm of the physical and in the social order. It may be that he has failed to find health and strength and has no hope of ever finding them. He may have to attend church on crutches; he may not be able to attend at all. 'What does it matter', he will say, 'so long as everything is right between God and myself?' He may be out of work; he may be persecuted by his fellow-men. Even the Church may have forgotten him. But he knows that a far more important relation is all as it should be. It is settled between himself and God. That may be no reason why he should not seek to be sound in wind and limb, and endeavour to be a useful and effective member of the

community. But there may be circumstances which lie beyond his control, and perhaps beyond anyone's control, circumstances of birth and heritage, of luck and chance, which say to him, 'You will never know what it is to have a body free from pain. You will never know the joy of friendship and love'. Yet those circumstances cannot rob him of a quiet mind, a tranquil spirit, a joy unspeakable.

If that seems to be an overstatement of the case, read the hymns of Charles Wesley. This is the experience they affirm. It is not enough to say that it is an experience which ought to be and can be yours and mine. It was an experience for which John Wesley fought hard and thought hard. Truer far it seemed to him at first that we are here to be good, and that the goodness which will satisfy God is beyond our highest endeavour. And it appears to us, when we really 'face up to the question', that there is no hope of our ever being able to please God. We cannot even satisfy our own standards. To say that we are like amateurs, sheepishly exhibiting their handiwork to an expert, is to understate the case altogether. I can remember the confusion of face with which I sought to hide my feeble attempts at school lessons from the prying and frankly critical eyes of my neighbour, and the terrifying fear with which I awaited the comment of the teacher when his perambulations of the classroom brought him near enough to see. But that is not to be compared with the troubling of one's spirit when one knows that the book of one's life, with its blots and scrawls, is being subjected to the inquiring eyes of men or with the catching at one's heart at the thought that God has taken it up and is weighing its worth, if worth there be.

Can it be that the experience of Wesley is within our grasp? When he discovered it, his heart was strangely warmed, not simply because he himself was for ever at peace with God, but because he had a gospel to preach to all men. He could go to those who never willingly gave a thought to God, but who believed that to have full stomachs and 'jolly fine company' was life's best joy, and could tell them of a happiness of the heart and a fellowship of the spirit that was beyond their wildest dreams, and yet was theirs for the acceptance. He could go to those who were afraid of God and afraid of men, and bid them dismiss their fears, and look at God and men unafraid. To those who were dismayed by failure and bereft of hope he could say, 'strive no more, and yet rejoice'. To the unfortunate misfits of society, the outcasts of men, the infirm and the imprisoned, he could speak of a world in which their attunement could be perfect. He was a changed man, not because he was any better than he had been before, but because he had discovered a secret—and a secret of the first magnitude.

My newspaper has a story of two young doctors in Leeds who have been working for years on the problem of how to cure rheumatoid arthritis. They claim to have discovered that the injection of salts of gold makes the halt and the maimed whole. Picture the thrill of it! First of all came the burden of suffering, the helplessness and hopelessness of thousands who were imprisoned in misshapen and pain-racked bodies. Then came the patient diagnosis and careful examination, until the cause of the trouble was accurately known and named. After that, the search among the numberless chemicals and compounds for a corrective. Failure after failure,

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

until one glad day the secret was found—salts of gold. But the scientist is careful never to claim too much, and not to announce his findings until they are proved beyond all possibility of doubt. So the cure is tried and tried, and tried again, and is eventually established. The announcement is made and the world knows that one more of the enemies of its well-being is laid low.

That is a picture of what happened in another realm when Wesley discovered the secret of Justification by Faith, or, as we prefer to put it, of 'Getting Right With God'. No scientist could be more careful in sifting the facts and examining the evidence. He searched the Bible. He collaborated with men who, like himself, were out to discover the secret. He tried every likely remedy, and when the real thing appeared he withheld his assent until he could doubt no more. He was no purveyor of quack medicines, and he offered nothing to others which had not been tried at the bar of his own judgement and proved to the hilt in his own experience.

What precisely is the secret? It is the apparently incredible fact that we have no need, as indeed we have no power, to satisfy God. By any standard of human right and reason we can only appear in His presence with the dread with which a guilty criminal is dragged before a judge. And our Judge is infallible. One of the interesting features of great criminal trials is that the criminal, though guilty, is deceived into thinking that he can convince the judge of his innocence. That refuge, such as it is, is not open to us when we are dealing with God. He knows the truth about us better even than we know it ourselves. But the glorious fact is that God does not ask us to satisfy Him; He presents

us with what does satisfy Him. That beautiful life once lived in Galilee is His gift to our troubled or careless hearts.

It does not matter that we have hated our enemies: He loved His. It does not matter that we lied and stole and committed adultery and mocked our parents: He was true and honest and pure and dutiful. It does not matter that we have been hard and callous and cold and self-centred: He was kind and gentle, and warmly generous in His self-giving. It does not matter that our subconscious self is a mass of channels, worn deep by evil thoughts, and of ugly complexes that we hide as assiduously as a respectable family hides its skeleton in the cupboard. What does matter is that His subconscious life was peopled by angels and as pure as Heaven itself. That satisfies God and He gives it to us. We are such a wicked lot that the only thing we are capable of doing with a life like that of Jesus is to crucify it. It would have been the same whenever He came. The world never has known what to do with such a life, unless it be to quench it; and it still does not know. But that which we hang upon a cross God gives back to us, and the symbol of our infamy is become the sign of our pardon.

How such a thing can be is not here our inquiry. We do not need to follow the theologian through all the intricacies of his theories of the Atonement. All we need is a firm confidence in our deliverance. The health of our bodies does not depend on our taking a degree in medicine, or even on our poring over a volume of popular medical knowledge. We shall only find with Jerome K. Jerome that we have the symptoms of every disease except housemaid's knee, and the more

susceptible of us may suspect that we have even that. Our social relationships do not depend upon our knowledge of economics, and we can spend our wages wisely without understanding all about the gold standard. But if we are to be made well we must swallow the pills and potions that are prescribed for us and no one can take them for us. We must use the money that is placed at our disposal. And we must personally accept God's way of putting things right.

John Wesley was very emphatic on this point, and we must be emphatic about it too. After all, this is what we want and what we must have if the highest and most important adjustment of our lives is to be secured. Mass movements there have been and doubtless must be. Moody and Sankey, Gipsy Smith, and John Wesley himself have shown us that hundreds can find peace with God at the same time. But the personal factor is there all the time. You cannot throw salts of gold into the air and cure people in the mass. There must be the personal administration. Yet we are told that at Leeds they can deal with two hundred cases at one sitting. You cannot correct all the dietetic improprieties of the world by newspaper articles. There must be the individual acceptance of the principles of wise feeding. Still thousands may try the Hay Diet at the same time. Similarly, you cannot secure the right relationship to God except by yourself and for yourself. You have to accept the gift of Jesus and His cross as God's way of putting everything right between you and Him.

We all need to have matters put right. Some are more sensitive, more alive to their need, more sensible of their sin than others. Some seem to be able to live with their

sins on terms of mutual accommodation, like a dog with his fleas. To others sin is like a gnawing tooth, and some are as little likely to find peace with it as a cancer patient is with his disease. It takes a great deal to convince some people of their need to put things right with God; others seem to think of nothing else. But the gospel which John Wesley preached, translated into terms of our modern life, is a vital message which meets every one's need. It is the finest thing the psychoanalyst can find for bringing relief to the poor distressed mind that will not rest because it has not adjusted itself to God. It is the finest thing the evangelist can proclaim to the awakened and repentant sinner. It is the most effective thing the preacher can expound, both to those who trust in themselves that they are righteous, and to those who cry 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner'. It is the old prophetic hope become assured and personal, 'Come, let us reason together. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as wool'.

George Herbert in his poem 'Judgement' describes the scene of the day when God will call for every man's book, and avows what he will then do.

What others mean to do, I know not well;
 Yet I hear tell,
 That some will turn to Thee some leaves therein,
 So void of sin,
 That they in merit shall excel.

But I resolve, when Thou shalt call for mine,
 That to decline,
 And thrust a Testament into Thy hand:
 Let that be scanned.
 Then shalt Thou find my faults are Thine.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

What George Herbert hoped to do on the Day of Judgement we can do now. At least we could, were it not that God has already forestalled us with the assurance that this is in accord with the facts of the case.

It is most wonderful to know
His love for me so free and sure;
But 'tis more wonderful to see
My love for Him so weak and faint.

And yet I want to love Thee, Lord;
O light the flame within my heart,
And I will love Thee more and more,
Until I see Thee as Thou art.

It is a poor start on our side for an adjustment that promises a perfect fellowship, but its hopefulness lies in the fact that it is so good a start on His. What God has so well begun cannot fail.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Why is it essential that the individual should know that all is right between God and himself?
2. Which is the more important element in human happiness, social surroundings or religious faith, and why?
3. What advantages follow to the man who is justified by faith? Can you suggest some which are not mentioned in this chapter?
4. Collect as many verses as you can from Charles Wesley's hymns which express the doctrine of Justification by Faith.
5. In what way was this doctrine welcome to the people of Wesley's time?
6. Is there any urgent need for preaching it to-day?



II

THE NEW BIRTH

‘But as soon as he is born of God, there is a total change in all these particulars. The “eyes of his understanding are opened” (such is the language of the great Apostle); and, He who of old “commanded light to shine out of darkness” shining on his heart, he sees the light of the glory of God, his glorious love, “in the face of Jesus Christ”. His ears being opened, he is now capable of hearing the inward voice of God, saying, “Be of good cheer; thy sins are forgiven thee; Go and sin no more”. This is the purport of what God speaks to his heart; although perhaps not in these very words.’

JOHN WESLEY. Sermon on ‘The New Birth’

II

THE NEW BIRTH

ONCE, as a boy, I possessed a penny with two heads. The *raison d'être* of such a coin was, I imagine, that its possessor should be able to dabble with the ultimate nature of things, and to toss for innings or 'sides' with the satisfaction of knowing that he could always win. But the joy it brought was very short-lived. What happened to the coin I do not remember, unless it eventually managed to pass itself off as an honest penny at the local sweet-shop. It was well to be rid of it, because it was an affront to the innate nature of things. It is the nature of a penny to have a 'head' and a 'tail' in its make-up. Where that is not the case there has been some tampering with its honest character. You must be able to rely upon its two-sidedness, and the occasional tampering with such honest coinage does not really challenge our confidence that the coins we handle are normal minted 'head-and-tail' creatures.

Which things are a parable. Opposites are inseparable. Where there is 'Justification by Faith' there is 'A New Birth'. Where God puts things right between us and Himself we have a new slant on life. That belongs to the ultimate nature of things, and it is not altered by the fact that an occasional dabbler makes play with the ultimates by putting the king's head on both sides of the coin. That an odd Antinomian leaves it all to God, and refuses to face the implications in his own life, does

not invalidate the normal course of events, in which, when a man grasps the tremendous truth that God has cleaned up the whole business of our sinful nature in the life and cross of Jesus Christ, his life takes a new direction. You cannot wrap yourself about the Cross without realizing that life cannot go on as it has gone. 'Simply to Thy cross I cling' is bound in the eternal nature of things with 'Thou O Christ art all I want'. The phrase 'A new slant' is as true as it is expressive. If you plot a graph of the moral and religious life, it is not so much a matter of straight up and straight down, as of inclining in an upward and of declining in a downward direction; it is not so much the alternative between a drive to destruction and an urge to salvation as a veering to the right or left at a more or less acute angle. Life, as a matter of fact, is full of new slants. When a child, who has lived in the imaginative world of fairies and Santa Claus, moves into the matter-of-fact world he takes a decided slant and life can never be quite the same again. When, at a later stage, he moves from accepted beliefs to logical proof, he has another bend in the direction of his life. Perhaps it was just at that fascinating juncture that the boy Jesus stood when He plied the doctors of the law with questions in the Temple. This new slant is clearly described by Marjorie Harrison: 'The only satisfactory thing in the whole time-table was the moment when one came to the end of a geometrical theorem. Logical conclusions gave a sense of completion and satisfaction. In future, if a rule could be proved to be sensible I lost at least some desire to break it. I was ready to listen to reason. People who could give reasonable answers to my questions earned great respect. And I wanted

grown-ups from the depths of their infallible wisdom to give me proof of the correctness of many things.' Many of us will bless our later school-days for the help they gave us in getting that new slant on life. And then there is that incredibly wonderful slant on life that comes when a person falls in love. People may wax jocular or cynical about it but they do not doubt its reality.

Among these new slants on life one of the most significant is that which comes at the awakening of a person to the reality of the spiritual. That awakening may come early or late, quickly or gradually; the important thing to notice is that it deflects the footsteps. Things can never be the same again to an awakened spirit. We may well ask ourselves if that is what John Wesley meant when he spoke of 'The New Birth'. It is enough to say, by way of answer, that he himself had long been alive to the spiritual before he was born again, or as we put it, before he got that unique new slant on life. So we have to look for something which is much more than an awakening to the spiritual. What Wesley describes as Regeneration is the reflex in our hearts of God's love to us in Jesus Christ. To quote his own words, 'It is to have the mind which was in Christ Jesus'. When a man, obsessed by the sense of his own sin, or awakened to the lack of worth in himself, comes face to face with the cross of Jesus, there is a natural reaction, and the normal effect is to make him resolve to be like Jesus.

Gazing thus our sin we see,
 Learn Thy love while gazing thus;
 Sin which laid the Cross on Thee,
 Love which bore the Cross for us.

PLAIN TRUTH

Here we learn to serve and give,
And, rejoicing, self deny;
Here we gather love to live,
Here we gather faith to die.

That reaction may be violent or gentle according to the temperament and make-up, according to the virulence or mildness of the character. I think, for instance, of the young fellow who declared that all his life he had been 'hag-ridden by God', and I picture the relief which came to him when he learned with Francis Thompson that the Hound of Heaven—or the 'Hag' of Heaven—is the God of Love. I can imagine some fast footwork in service where there has been such fleetness in flight. I can see some signal devotion to the service of perfect freedom where there has been such slavery to fear. I remember how Paul, the indefatigable seeker after righteousness, swooned at the realization that his tireless efforts got him nowhere, because he was offering duty to God, while God was casting love before him as a pearl; and I can understand how that great adventurer after the possibilities of the law became the bond-servant of Christ. And in contrast to these vehement souls I think of a gentle soul like Christina Rossetti, brought up by a Christian mother, her eyes always kept open to the spiritual, and I expect the reaction to be less startling. But the reaction is there. Here is the record of it:

Thou who didst hang upon a barren tree,
My God for me;
Though I till now be barren, now at length,
Lord give me strength
To bring forth fruit to Thee.

And she played her part, quiet and unassuming, but steadfast and true, a victor in spite of her fears, and one who did not fail in the service of a Martha, while she was at heart a Mary.

But we must remember that these are illustrations of a natural effect, a normal reaction. We are dealing with something that is capable of being universally applied. From virtuous, morally exemplary people like Paul and John Wesley, to gaol-birds and abandoned criminals, it is the normal effect of the grace and love of God in the cross of Jesus Christ to produce a deep and abiding determination to be like Him. What was so obvious in the life-time of Jesus, when the fullness of God's love was not yet disclosed, has become still more convincing as men have meditated on the meaning of the Cross. We are bound to accept such love as the free gift of God. But we cannot accept it except on terms. Only on condition that we shall devote our lives to becoming like Him can we acknowledge the free gift.

It was one of the problems of the Middle Ages to discover on what principle of justice the cross of Jesus could be explained. There was much talk of a ransom paid to the Devil or to God, much talk of satisfaction, and no little exercise of elementary arithmetic. But, surely, as the worst sins cannot be punished, so the highest virtues cannot be rewarded. You can punish people for not keeping the Ten Commandments, but you cannot punish them for not obeying the bidding of Jesus, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and mind, and soul, and strength, and thy neighbour as thyself'. Nor can you reward its observance. The simple fact is that love lifts us right out of

the realm of bargaining. You can give a boy a beautiful book for attending Sunday School but you cannot give him a book for loving his teacher. Thank God it is so. What mother would accept a cheque from her boy in settlement for her priceless love, and what woman would set a price upon her love? Far better that it should go unrequited than that it should be marked at a market value. Love demands nothing in return, not even love. The love of God does not demand anything, not even love. But love does beget love and with rare exceptions love is mutual. At any rate no self-respecting person is prepared to accept love without loving in return. The very fact that God does not demand our love adds to the greatness of His love, and a love which takes us as we are, and loves us for what we are with all our faults, is a love which calls for the devotion to Him of all that we can be.

These observations all lead up to the fact that 'Justification by Faith' and 'The New Birth' belong to the same order, the order of love bestowed and love requited. To be put right with God simply means accepting His love. I can think of no better illustration of faith in this connexion than the unhesitating 'Yes' of a young woman to the man who offers her his heart. It is the self-committal that puts its whole trust in the fact of being loved. Such a self-committal rules out any question of merits or deserts. The woman who, under such circumstances, would insist on weighing up her merits and saying, 'I deserve his love for my taste in dress, for my skill in shopping, for my great musical ability', would not only be foolish and undiscerning; she would be extremely hard to find. And the man who, faced with the love of God, kept enumerating his

THE NEW BIRTH

own merits would be faithless indeed. The measure of his faith is the measure in which he accepts God as the Lover of his soul.

But our business at present is to look at the new slant on life which such an event brings. It is like being in a new world. It is being in a new world. And the new world is a satisfactory one. The old world wasn't. Health of body it may have given up to a point. But the highest fitness of body demands a fit mind and a sane soul. Still, the old world may have been passably comfortable from that point of view. Health of mind? Yes, even that in a measure the old world may have provided. Is it not a common observation that the cleverest people, the high-brows, are often supremely lacking in spiritual grace? And even health of spirit and much that is admirable may have been found there. Yet it was unsatisfactory because over it all hung the pall of guilt. It was all a case of making the best of life behind prison bars.

Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night.

But the new world is a free world.

My chains fell off, my heart was free
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

There is a radiance about life in this new world that is neither just a feeling of physical well-being, nor of intellectual enjoyment, nor yet of spiritual awareness. It is the exuberance of a soul that is in love because it is loved. As Miss Havergal puts it,

I love, I love my Master,
I will not go out free.

Free and yet not free! Freed from the chains of sin and nature's night; but fast bound for ever in the bonds of love. That is a satisfactory new world, and the only satisfactory one. One sometimes wonders how and where to begin this task of renewing the human body, mind and soul, so that the whole world may be for us what it ought to be; so that we may have this new slant on life. The medical man who starts hopefully with the child finds that he is inexorably driven back to the parents and the entail of defects and imperfections. The dentist has only to start his investigations into the troubles of the unwilling ten-year-old to realize that he ought to have begun with the child's father and mother. The educationist likewise turns optimistically to the child, only to realize the wisdom of Carlyle's dictum that a child's education should begin three generations before he is born. When I first turned my attention to gardening I found that it was almost impossible to get on with it because of the things that ought to have been done, according to my advisers, three years before. The evangelist, however, is driven further back still and finds that he must begin with Adam. We imagine that Paul is wrestling with the dogmas of Rabbinic lore when he harks back to 'the first man Adam'. But the truth is that he is wrestling with the plain facts of everyday life, and seeking for a solution to the difficulties of his contemporaries. But while the doctor, the dentist, and the teacher, address themselves hopefully to the task at the best point they can, the evangelist has the problem settled for him. The entail is broken and the past is wiped out.

A second Adam to the fight
And to the rescue came.

This second Adam accomplishes the seemingly impossible:

He breaks the power of cancelled sin.

The past is cancelled, and the present and the future are secure.

Much play is made in these days with the contribution of the psycho-analyst who is able to discover the source of those disorders of the spirit whose effects run over into the mind and the body. He can bring to the surface sin after sin, real or imaginary. He can announce to the distressed mind the fact that these are the cause of its disease. But unless he can go on to say 'Thy sins, which are many, are forgiven' he falls short of the possibilities of his healing art. The evangelist may likewise fall short of his possibilities, and often does so, because he does not recognize his allies in the healing art, the doctors and teachers of the body and the mind. When these are recognized and the evangelist attends to his own proper work, the latter has the most glorious message the world has ever heard.

I fear we often forget that the Gospel is news, and that the first evangelists were journalists who knew the news-value of what they were offering to the world. When I had myself spent years in studying the writings of the early Christian Fathers, treating them all as so much Theology, it suddenly dawned upon me that I was missing the essence of their writings, because I had imagined that they were 'literary gents' lost in philosophical speculations, and had failed to realize that they were journalists who had made a scoop.

The Gospel always has been news in the journalist's sense of the word, and always will be good news as long as there are people who have sinned. We miss its sensational character because we read it in the journals of long ago, and do not realize that what we are looking at there is only a limited and partial view of it as applied to the life of that day. When we open our newspapers and read of the new developments of physical culture, of sun-bathing, of dieting, of the new discoveries of a cure for cancer or diabetes, of the fresh views of education as a preparation for the business of living and say to ourselves 'This is the stuff', let us rejoice in the still better news that when the doctor and the teacher, the scientist and the economist have proclaimed their several messages of hope, beyond it all and above it all, and greater than all in its assurance of well-being, is the news that every man's sins of thought, and word, and deed are forgiven, and that the love which pledges *that* for him in the Cross of Christ, is for ever about him. That is, to change the figure and return to our starting-point, only one side of the coin. But we can safely leave it to the ultimate nature of things to determine that the other side is there too. If the penny in your own purse proves on its being turned over to have the correct impress on the other side, you can safely assume that all coins are the same. If the forgiveness of your sins has given you a new slant on life, be assured it does as much for everyone else.

O that the world might taste and see
 The riches of His grace;
 The arms of love that compass *me*
 Would *all mankind* embrace.

THE NEW BIRTH

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What other illustrations of converse truths occur to you?
2. In what way is the New Birth the most significant of all changes in life?
3. Do you expect every conversion to be accompanied by the same external evidences? Give reasons for your answer.
4. Explain how being born anew 'makes all things new'.
5. Does the New Birth suggest to you (a) a gospel which you must pass on as 'news' to your friends? (b) a source of healing that may reach the root of their discontent?
6. 'Ye must be born again.' Why?

III

ADOPTION

'The natural man neither fears nor loves God, one under the law, fears—one under grace, loves Him. The first has no light in the things of God, but walks in utter darkness; the second sees the painful light of hell; the third, the joyous light of heaven. He that sleeps in death, has a false peace; he that is awakened has no peace at all; he that believes, has true peace—the peace of God filling and ruling his heart. . . . The Christian enjoys the true glorious liberty of the sons of God.'

JOHN WESLEY. Sermon on 'The Spirit of Bondage
and of Adoption'

III

ADOPTION

Do you remember Charles Lamb's cogitations at Blakesmoor on the subject of gentle birth? He says, 'To have the feeling of gentility, it is not necessary to have been born great. The pride of ancestry may be had on cheaper terms than to be obliged to an importunate race of ancestors. . . . What to us the uninterrupted current of their bloods, if our own did not answer within us to a cognate and corresponding elevation?' And after feasting his eyes on the emblems of former greatness, disregarded by the lineal heirs, he claims his heritage in these things. 'This is the only true gentry, by adoption; the veritable change of blood, and not as empirics have fabled, by transfusion.'

It is good to find so able an advocate of a theory dear to the heart of John Wesley, who had to listen to the pratings of those who imagined that their blue blood counted with God, and resented the very suggestion that common people could know that their sins were forgiven and that they were the children of God. Those pratings he countered with Lamb's argument that 'the only true gentry is by adoption'. But the argument has a wider reference than that. The sons of God are those who appreciate the privilege and accept the conditions. The looseness of language which speaks of all men as the children of God misses a distinction that indicates a difference. 'All God's

chillun got wings' as the negro spiritual has it, but there are lots of wingless creatures about.

First of all, there are those who are utterly indifferent to the question of whether they are children of God or not. Charles Lamb found few in his day who were interested enough to claim the riches of the House of — at Blakesmoor. The majority of people were unaffected by the gallery of family portraits, the stately busts, the hall, the gardens, and all the paraphernalia of past glory. And few in our day are deeply concerned about the same things. They go about their daily occupation as indifferently as J. B. Priestley went about his business during the days of the recent crisis. He says: 'I did not know whether I would be giving my Christmas presents this year in the reign of Edward the Eighth, George the Sixth, or Stanley Baldwin the First, but I knew that, whatever they settled among themselves, I was still going to give my Christmas presents as usual, and that they would have to be bought.' The people of England have always shown a large measure of indifference to Debrett. So long as they can potter along, making both ends meet, more or less, and enjoying their football matches and marmalade, they do not hanker after the heritage of the gentility. And as long as the conditions of work are reasonably endurable, and remuneration is sufficient, they do not cry out about their hunger for spiritual things. They do not betray any sense of their loss in being shut out of the privileges of the sons of God.

Then there are those who know that they have no place among the children of God and who are very sick at heart about it. They do appreciate the things

that belong to the heritage of the privileged, and resent their own lack of them. They despair of ever rising out of the bondage of their living conditions to the position of culture and freedom which seems high beyond their power of attainment. Nor have they learned the secret of those situated as themselves who have claimed with Lamb the gentility of adoption. 'We are continually reading in the Press reports', says W. F. Watson, 'of workman geniuses—a cloak-room attendant with a talent for designing illuminated addresses; a car attendant who specializes in drawings on wood; a van-boy of eighteen who painted "Song of the Dove" with such technique and colouring that it gained the admiration of the Principal of the Royal College of Art.' But the people of whom we are thinking are not geniuses and can only regard these things as beyond them. Such people are to be found in the realm of religion, and they are to be pitied, not as Wesley claims, because of the hell that awaits them, but because they are now having 'a hell of a time'. No more miserable state can be imagined than that of the man who has awakened to the reality of his need and does not know how and where to supply that need. He truly 'doesn't know what he wants and won't be happy till he gets it'. He looks at the people who are satisfied with a godless life, and is tempted to ask, with one of the characters in Mr. H. G. Wells's film 'Things to Come', 'Why can't we all be satisfied with what we have got, like the animals in the fields?' He looks at some neighbour or friend who is at peace with God, rejoicing in his secure sonship, and envies what he does not understand. He sees people who have no more native goodness than himself but who by some secret dignity comport them-

selves as the aristocracy of the spiritual world, and he is dumbfounded by the mystery of it all.

But the truth is that it is not simply a matter of deportment. These people whom he envies *are* the gentry. 'To have the feeling of gentility it is not necessary to have been born great.' Birth is here of no account. Re-birth is the thing; to have a new slant on life. We grow hilarious over the birth of Jesus, and rightly so. Yet the burden of our songs and anthems is the wonder of His birth and not the miracle of our re-birth. But 'Till He is born in thee, thy soul is still forlorn'. To what does all the jollification of Christmas amount if we know that so much of it is mere make-believe? We wear paper hats and blow penny trumpets because the mystic crackers have brought their challenge to us. But when the fire is reduced to dying embers and the lights are switched off, will there be no warmth in our hearts and no light in our souls, and will the following days find us still the victims of fear and the sorry possessors of inferiority complexes?

The birth of Jesus and all the ministries of His life are enriching and shed a glory on the common ways of life, but even that is mere shadow compared with the glory of the sons of God. That new slant which is ours because we know that God loves us, becomes all the more definite and exhilarating as we realize that it is the love of a Father for His sons 'Born into His family below and by redemption His'.

Here is no room for fear and none for inferiority complexes. We have seen how effectively the grace of God takes away fear. The assurance that one is a son of God makes that banishment complete and permanent. That was obvious in the days of Wesley when the heavy

parent of Victorian days had not made his appearance. 'Mr. Barrett of Wimpole Street' would have been as incomprehensible to Wesley as he is to us. But he came in to rob a few generations of their fun, and what is worse to rob the New Testament of the sweetness of its message for them. We may have missed something of the ethical side of the Gospel because in our day a man can be such a good 'pal' to his children that the only fear they have with regard to him is the fear of hurting him. God may have come to be regarded as too good-natured, so that we dread His judgement less than our own. As Francis Thompson says,

Is it, if Heaven the future showed,
Is it the all severest mode
To see ourselves with the eyes of God?
God rather grant, at His assize,
He see us not with our own eyes!

Yet we ought to rejoice to know that God is good-natured beyond our wildest hopes. If it be true that to spare the rod is to spoil the child, then God is the most foolish parent of all. This indulgence is to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness—but there it is. He suffers for it and Jesus suffered for it; but 'perfect love casts out fear'.

There is no room either for the dreaded inferiority complex. God's children are not 'duds'. I have seen some melancholy examples of the misery that envelops the man who feels that for some reason or other he cannot stand up to his fellows. I have known a physical dwarf develop into a recluse, because his infirmity made him always conscious of his inferiority. I have seen a girl degenerate from a bright scholarship pupil into a

hopeless back number, because her parents sent her to a fashionable boarding-school without giving her clothes of a kind that would put her somewhere on an equality with her school-mates. I have watched mental duds in school wither in face of the fact that they could not keep pace with their fellows at Latin and Greek. The suffering of a dud at games from the contempt of his schoolmates is a commonplace. Some of them accept it as a part of their lot in life, as inseparable from them as the twitching of its nose is from a rabbit, and often as irritating to the onlooker. Others make a brave effort to assert themselves. Plain people overdress, short people become pompous. The boy who is dull at lessons tries to find some compensation in the nimbleness of his feet or hands. I once knew a student who in this way developed into an expert footballer and, though I envied him his skill in that direction, the examiners were not impressed, and decided that his cleverness was at the wrong end of his anatomy.

The struggle, however, is often pathetic; as it is sometimes admirable. 'I sent my boy to take dancing lessons,' said a friend, 'because I don't want him to have an inferiority complex in the circles in which he is bound to move.' And then the lad had to learn bridge as assiduously as he had studied mathematics, and to dress like a tailor's dummy, and to do a host of things for which he had no flair or inclination, in order to stave off the feeling of inferiority. The martyrdom of an uneducated person who determines to keep her end up against a set of blue-stockings is fearful to behold, and the plight of the man who in certain circles has to confess that he has not read the latest best-seller, is not much better.

One way out is to take a course of much-advertised lessons in the development of personality: 'Join our classes and become the soul of the party.' I dare say there is something in that. We can all of us be improved if we can afford the cash and the time. Another way out is to concentrate on the deficiencies of other folk. We rarely realize how frequently the scold or the scandalmonger is nothing more than a person with an inferiority complex putting up a fight for his or her own salvation from insignificance. I am not defending; I am simply observing. A still better way out is to discover something that lifts you up once for all and places your feet on the rock of self-respect—of pride in yourself, if you will. The one thing that can and will do that for us is to be loved and to love. 'If people grow presuming and self-important over such matters as a dukedom or the Holy See,' says Robert Louis Stevenson, 'they will scarcely support the dizziest elevation in life without some suspicion of a strut; and the dizziest elevation is to love and be loved in return.' And if the lover be God! That is a still dizzier elevation; but it is there we may each one of us stand.

It was fiercely objected to the early Methodists that they were enthusiastic, and extravagant in their claims regarding what they had found; but the truth is that something had found them, something which dignified them beyond the common understanding. It is often forgotten that the exuberance was the natural reaction to a lifetime of inferiority.

Outcasts of men to you I call.

You do not need to go to India to find the outcasts of men, nor to the slums or the distressed areas. I can

understand the elevation, the arrogance, if you insist, of the man who is adopted into the family of God. Was it not Billy Bray who was known as the King's Son? It was a violent transition for him, and it is a violent transition for all of us, and I am willing to wait for the settling down process to develop in every new discoverer of the joy of the Gospel and to await the appearance of the gracious humility which in due time must appear. Appear it must, for the simple fact that the dignity is not of our deserving but of God's bestowing.

Meanwhile all other inferiorities may remain or they may disappear. One thing is certain. They do not count. I have already hinted at the mischief that is done by the existence of the inferiority complexes. Out of them come the hatreds that poison our relations with one another. Struggle affords no adequate deliverance. It may do something for those who have it in them to rise but who need some stimulus. It only does harm where the inferiority is inherent in the nature of things. There are so many people who would be lovable if it were not for that sense of inferiority which ruins their temper. Yet here is the miracle which cures the disease because it eradicates the cause. God loves them in their unlovableness. 'If ye love them which love you, what thank have ye?' We have to confess that that is as far as we have got. But God in His perfection loves the unlovable and out of that comes their redemption.

'Tis by Thy loveliness we're won
To home and Thee again,
And as we are Thy children true
We are more truly men.

Yet that miracle is not achieved in a day. As G. K. Chesterton put it, 'You can't grow a beard in a moment

of passion', and you cannot grow all the virtues of the children of God in a moment of ecstasy. We shall have something to say about that later on. For the present it is sufficient to grasp the astonishing and elevating fact that we have the rank and dignity of the sons of God and are the heirs of all the promises. The story is told of Princess Elizabeth, that when she was very small she had one morning done something of which her mother disapproved. She thought, however, that she might get away with it, and a moment later appeared at the breakfast table with a confident, 'Good morning!' Receiving no reply she repeated her greeting and continued, 'It's Royalty speaking'. Then her mother took her in hand and explained that Royalty required of her as much as it conferred upon her. We have much to learn of what is demanded of us, but let us cherish that conferred dignity which gives us the assurance that every time we open our mouth 'It's Royalty speaking'. Then shall we too realize that our walk in life is not something to be ashamed of but something to live up to.

Jesus, from Thy throne above,
Deign to fill us with Thy love,
So that all around may see
We belong, dear Lord, to Thee.
Then we truthfully can sing:
We are children of the King.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What are the reasons why people are indifferent to the privileges of 'the sons of God'?
2. Show how the Methodist gospel abolishes the 'fear-complex' and 'inferiority complex'. Is it the most satisfactory way?

PLAIN TRUTH

3. 'The scold or the scandalmonger is nothing more wicked than a person with an inferiority complex putting up a fight for his or her salvation from insignificance.' Is this true?
4. What was the source of the enthusiasm of the early Methodists? Was it justified and can you suggest any modern parallels?
5. How does the doctrine of Adoption answer the needs and correct the failings of (a) the man who trusts in himself that he is righteous; and (b) the man who cries, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'?

IV

THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

‘Although they feel the root of bitterness in themselves, yet are they endued with power from on high to trample it continually underfoot, so that it cannot “spring up to trouble them”; insomuch that every fresh assault which they undergo, only gives them fresh occasion of praise, of crying out, “Thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through Jesus Christ, our Lord”. They now “Walk after the Spirit”, both in their hearts and lives. They are taught of Him to love God and their neighbour, with a love which is as “a well of water, springing up into everlasting life”.’

JOHN WESLEY. Sermon on ‘The First Fruits of the Spirit’

IV

THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

EVEN the sons of a king are not exempt from the frailties of human nature, and even the highly civilized product of modern times has to be something of a lion-tamer. Mr. H. G. Wells has thought it a task worthy of his powers to bring home to us the vitality of our latent instincts and to make us see how much, in the inwardness of our being, we really fear them. His latest creation, *The Croquet Player*, is a picture of any one of us. We can ring the variations to include the players of all games from dominoes to football, and players of none. We can bring in the young and the old, and the ladies are not excluded. In his story Mr. Wells introduces this typical figure to an intruder who tells him of the men of the neighbouring marshlands, men of the remote past, filled with the primitive lusts, untamed and uncivilized. The terror of the croquet player, at the news of the survival of such brutes, becomes our terror as we turn page after page and realize that it is all a parable of our present life, and that the men of the marshlands are our instincts. Even the sons of God have to face the problem of those instincts.

As John Wesley put it, 'The corruption of nature does still remain, even in those who are the children of God by faith; that they have in them the seeds of pride and vanity, of anger, lust and evil desire, yea, sin of every kind, is too plain to be denied, being matter of

daily experience'. It is only to be expected that Wesley should follow the light of his day, and counsel his converts to hunt and harry these creatures of Nature, as he regarded them, in the hope (which seemed to be very remote) that eventually they would become extinct. Meanwhile, they were to cultivate the graces so opposed to them and so difficult to master. The problem had not been visualized as one of re-direction. The instincts have not been eradicated and never will be. And graces will never be cultivated out of nothing. The graces are converted instincts. Wesley denounced people for caring for the preservation of life on earth and applauded them for caring for the preservation of their life thereafter, without recognizing that he was appealing to the very instinct which he condemned. He lamented the pride and vanity which is the raw material out of which is fashioned the glory of the saint. He deplored the anger which is the substance of righteous indignation, and the evil desire which is the basis of hunger and thirst for the Bread of Life and the Water of Life. It is wiser, we have discovered, to put our faith in the re-direction of the resources of our nature than in the hope of substituting pallid virtues for virile vices.

I laid my pen down at this point in order to attend a rendering of Handel's *Messiah* by the Sheffield Musical Union. During the interval in the performance a veteran minister said to me, 'I wonder what Hitler or Mussolini would say to this?' My reply was that what impressed me about it was that here we had a striking example of the sublimation of the instinct which those two leaders are exploiting in the raw. Here were four hundred performers absolutely controlled by an inspired conductor. Up went her hand

and the sopranos burst into song; a flick of her finger and the contraltos sped in pursuit; another flick and the tenors took up the hunt; a nod and the basses were in. On they went through movement after movement, and chorus after chorus, and not one of them had a soul to call his or her own. It was magnificent—the herd instinct at its best. It was all the more magnificent in that the unseen King was there to receive their devotion: ‘King of kings and Lord of lords!’ Not, you will notice, ‘King’ where there are no kings, not ‘Lord’ where there are no lords. Not something alien and different, but the sublimation of the age-old loyalties.

Is it not better thus? Time was when organs and choirs, to say nothing of such vile instruments as fiddles, were regarded as the peculiar property of the Devil, and the spirit that sought to express itself with their aid was to be fought and suppressed. Now we have come to see that that spirit only needed to be re-directed to sweep men on to glorify God ‘with hearts and hands and voices’. Sometimes we find a hint that Wesley was before his time in some of his perceptions. His advice on the use of money shows an appreciation of the principle which we have been considering. ‘Gain all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.’ We might have expected him to say, ‘Refuse to gain money. That is the way of the natural man. Refuse to save money. That is the resort of the unregenerate’. A cynic might say that he was saved from that because he was worldly wise. Be that as it may, he was sufficiently modern to look for the sublimation of so important an instinct as that of acquisitiveness rather than for its suppression.

Whatever may have been the case with Wesley, we

must rejoice in the discovery, or the re-discovery, for in essence it is as old as the story of the Fall, of the fact that, as Dr. Marrett expresses it, 'the savage is no saint . . . but it is truer to say that his ferocity is a by-product of his nature, than that the gentler virtues are a by-product'. Or, to give the truth a wider reference, all the great instinctive powers of our nature are not things which have crept in after God had finished making man in His own likeness. They are His creation, brought into being for our use and for His glory. What is wrong is the direction they have taken. The herd-instinct, for example, is a power for good beyond our calculating ability. The way in which a nation can rise as one man and shake off an evil that threatens its welfare is something for which we ought to be truly and profoundly grateful. It is capable of being misused, of course, but most people are as good as they are because their fellows will not let them be worse. We have seen something of its powers and possibilities in that picture of the rendering of the *Messiah*. Corporate prayer and corporate effort for the evangelization of the world are other indications. Even the pressure of the popular will in a matter like the wearing of a poppy on Armistice Day is an illustration of the same thing. We deplore, rightly, the many ways in which this instinct is exploited and misdirected, but let us be duly thankful for the power which calls us to join in worship and prayer and service. How much of the fruits of the Spirit are found in our lives because the fellowship of the Church insists upon our cultivating them? And what sins we are saved from! Young people particularly are apt to be impatient of what they too often regard as foolish and unnecessary conventions. They might ruminate on

the fact that even a parson is probably a better man because of what is expected of him, and that those who are best able to do without some of the conventions are most dependent on others. With all its liability to go astray the instinct of the herd is, and pray God always will be, a great power for righteousness.

But it is time we looked at what are more distinctly personal 'fruits of the Spirit'. They are, according to Paul, 'love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, fidelity, meekness, temperance', to which Wesley adds large-heartedly, 'whatsoever else is lovely or praiseworthy'. Over against these Wesley puts, again following Paul, a lurid list of vices: 'adultery and fornication, uncleanness and lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, sedition, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings.' Between these two sets of activities Wesley counsels that we should 'trample upon the latter', the root of bitterness remaining even in the sons of God, and 'show forth in our lives' the former. We shall not be disloyal to the spirit of his admonitions if we prefer to harness the powers that produce the vices—as a by-product, let us remember—to their proper work of producing abundantly the fruits of the Spirit. It would not be possible even if it were scientific, to trace the origin of every one of the powers which have gone astray and to show how in the path of rectitude they speed along. We can, however, look at a few of the more obvious of them.

Galsworthy writes in a vivid figure of 'the spectacle of a man running down a road, followed at a more and more respectful distance by his own soul'. That might be a picture of man's adventures in the realm of love.

From the unsophisticated youth, who discovers that he is 'nuts' on a girl, to the blasé roué, who boasts of his 'affairs' among women and wine, everyone knows the difficulty of holding the passion of love in leash. A midget of a child who was setting out with a St. Bernard on a leash was asked where she was taking him. She replied: 'It all depends on where he wants to go.' Evidently she had had some experience with the brute. Love is an untractable creature. You may whip him in vain. He is as untamable as a wild cat and as unconquerable as a lion. So our task resolves itself into finding out where he wants to go and why he wants to go there, and suggesting how he can be made to want to go in the right direction. Love is too deeply rooted an instinct to be uprooted. The only hope of doing anything effective with it is to provide it with a new object. 'The expulsive power of a new affection' is a well-worn phrase born of wide observation. One affection can only be ousted by another. If Clifford has fallen for Nancy, however much people may object, Nancy is sure of him unless Clarice steals his affection. 'Could you be true to eyes of blue?' is an impertinent inquiry until it is elaborated into 'When you look into eyes of brown'.

But if the terror of this instinct is its irresistible power, the joy of it is that it can be directed towards the highest things: it can be directed to God. We are so created that we can love God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength. The pity is that too many Christians lay the avowal of such passionate love at the feet of some lesser object, and offer to God what leavings there may be of their personality. Kagawa is surely right in claiming that the Christian religion is not a sedative for

men of sense but something whose essence belongs to men gone mad with love for God. Wesley made the same claim in a more academic way. We are in a happier position to understand how such things can be. It is to be hoped we may be in as earnest and determined a spirit to lay our all at His feet in utter devotion. So instead of running down a road, followed at a more and more respectful distance by our own souls, or trying to discover where our love would like to lead us, we shall be His, body and soul, needing no leash, for the untamable is tamed and the unconquerable is overcome.

In what other directions can we look for illustrations of all-powerful instincts which can be brought into the scope of our salvation? Let us again assure ourselves that we are not so much dealing with any new manifestation of the working of God's Spirit in our lives as seeking a presentation of that working which accords with our present-day outlook. Here is a confirmation of our view which comes from long before even Wesley. The great Augustine said of himself after he had become a Christian, 'I am not changed. I have only found myself, I have only changed my path'. The story of his life is a striking illustration of a torrential personality, which poured as irresistibly through the channels of Christian activity, as it had rushed through the courses of wickedness. He illustrates the changed direction of love as few sinners or saints do, and any student of his writings knows that his vehement African nature, so rich in the instinct of his own race, manifested itself in his fervid intolerance of heretics. And strange though the blend may seem (it is really universal), he who showed so rich a development of the instinct of the herd, displayed quite as conspicuously the instinct of self-

assertion. He was a headstrong sinner, as wilful a youth as ever was, whose strength of will was the despair of his mother and of every one who desired his welfare. But it was that very strength of will which in after days was the most fruitful of all his virtues.

The instinct of self-assertion is a force that sometimes frightens us. 'Every man for himself, and Devil take the hindmost' is so apt a description of what takes place in the world that Christian teachers have sometimes fallen into the trap of thinking that the only way to deal with such a force is to smother it. That is a method which seems to have succeeded with bloodless monks and nuns, who probably make such good denizens of the cloister because they made such unsatisfactory inhabitants of the outer world. As Anatole France says, 'It is painful to see a young girl die voluntarily to the world. The nunnery is terrifying to all who do not enter its doors . . . but there are certain souls that gravitate thither by a natural bias. Claustal souls they are. Because they are innately unhuman and pacific, they quit the world and go down rejoicing into silence and peace. Many souls are born weary'. Not all of them, however, find their way into monasteries and nunneries. They live colourless Christian lives because they would otherwise be pale worldlings. The wall-flower at a dance becomes an onlooker at Christian service. But most of us have enough 'go' in us to make the task of breaking our wills and stifling our ambitions a hopeless task for ourselves and everybody else. That, again, is a hopeful thing for the Kingdom of God. Those energies and ambitions redirected can be charged with God's purposes.

When Catherine Booth was a child she was given on

occasion to violent outbursts of temper. How much of her later courage and determination was the sublimation of that primitive energy! Was there not a flash of that early spirit, harnessed to tremendous possibilities of service, when at a Liverpool Conference, it having been decided that her husband should give up his evangelistic work and return to the duties of a circuit, she rose from her seat, bent over the gallery, and declaimed in a clear ringing voice, 'Never!' It meant, for her husband and herself, going out like Abraham, not knowing whither they went, but it meant too the beginning of the Salvation Army. Addressing his comrades at her funeral, her husband said, 'She was good . . . a thorough hater of shams, hypocrisies, and make-believes. . . . She was love. . . . And, lastly, she was a warrior. She liked the fight'.

That brings me to one more of the instinctive powers of our nature which is there for the purpose of the service and glory of God—pugnacity, the love of a fight. Here, at all events, is a flame of the human spirit which it seems must needs be extinguished if we are to cultivate the Christian graces. Yet how much would thereby be lost. Dr. Joseph Parker was the son of a passionate, fanatical father, who lived in a turbulent neighbourhood and time. What had been on the surface with the father ran underground in the son. But it was there, and when the occasion for righteous indignation arose its natural strength was obvious. There was that unforgettable flood of denunciation of the Turks after the Armenian atrocities, when he finished up with 'God, damn the Sultan!' When Studdert-Kennedy was at Leeds Grammar School he withdrew from a debate in which he was to support the

thesis, 'That arbitration should be substituted for war', because, he said, he did not believe in it. When he changed his views we do not know, but he always maintained to the end that 'Peace is not the end of all our striving'. There was never to be for us the end of conflict but the turning of our pugnacious nature into the paths of creative conflict. We can never stop fighting, but we can choose what we will fight; and drink and war and disease and ignorance will not melt away of themselves. They are foes worthy of any man's steel, and we need all the fighting spirit we can muster if we are to triumph over them.

The outcome of such a discovery as this is to enlarge the possibilities of virtue and service, and to intensify the challenge to our divine sonship to achieve what is worthy of Him who has created us for Himself, and has redeemed our nature from the wanderlust that led us into the far country, and given us a new opportunity for the exercise of our redirected energies in the fellowship of His heart and home. For, let us remember, it is not simply the impartation of a new direction to this or that instinct, so that some part of our energy may cease to be a nuisance and become a help to the eternal order of righteousness; it is not that that we are contemplating but rather the full urge of all our being. This has taken a new slant, and, if we may revert to what we realized in dealing with that subject, it means that our whole personality finds adequate scope for its development in its relation to God, to our social surroundings, and to the world in which we live.

There are people who hope to attain the maximum effectiveness of life by disregarding the deepest powers of body, mind, and soul, which God has worked into

the universe of His creation, or by accepting them in part, and trusting to their own wisdom for the rest. Sometimes they seem to get away with it. I have been told that a well-known typewriter on the market violates every principle known to the engineer (it certainly is a bit of a freak), and yet it works satisfactorily. But no one ever suggests that manufacturers should depart from their well-proved principles because one man did it and got away with it. We have seen the same thing happen in the ordering of people's lives. Saints have triumphed in the realm of virtue because by some freakish disposition of their qualities they have found a surprising harmony along unconventional lines. We must not thereby be led to imagine that there is any hope of our turning out good work by any other than well-proved principles. The love of God, which gives us a new slant on life, because it enables us to live on the level of the sons of God, and which works by using all the resources of our nature, is our one hope of our being able in the realm of service to deliver the goods.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. 'The corruption of nature is a matter of daily experience.' Is this the same as to say that our instincts have obviously gone astray? What is the remedy in each case?
2. Show how the re-direction of the herd-instinct serves the purposes of the Gospel.
3. What other instincts can you name and how can each be harnessed to serve the ends of virtue?
4. Give illustrations of the 'expulsive power of a new affection'.
5. 'I am not changed. I have only found myself.' Illustrate this from the life of (a) St. Paul; (b) Augustine.
6. Does the monastic life represent the highest type of Christian virtue?



V

THE WITNESS OF OUR OWN SPIRIT

'I rejoice, because the sense of God's love to me has, by the same Spirit, wrought in me to love Him, and to love for His sake every child of man, every soul that He hath made. I rejoice, because he gives me to feel in myself "the mind that was in Christ" . . . I likewise rejoice, and will rejoice, because my conscience beareth me witness in the Holy Ghost, by the light He continually pours in upon it, that I "walk worthy of the vocation wherewith I am called".'

JOHN WESLEY. Sermon on 'The Witness of Our
Own Spirit'

V

THE WITNESS OF OUR OWN SPIRIT

GEORGE ELIOT makes Adam Bede say, 'I look at it as if the doctrine was finding names for your feelings'. That suggests at least a correspondence between theology and behaviour, between doctrine and experience. But it reverses what we now have to consider. It would surely be a case of experience gone mad, if we were to build up a theology or a system of doctrines on nothing more objective than our own feelings. Some have attempted it, only to find how unreliable such a procedure must be. A man with the toothache may be more conscious of his teeth than the dentist or the fellow with a perfect set of ivories is, but his opinions on dental matters are not likely to be more correct. A man who is in love may be more vividly aware of its joys and its sorrows than is the detached psychologist, but he is not on that account a more efficient judge of its place and value in life. A man who tastes the joy of religion is not thereby qualified to lay down universal rules for the direction of the lives of other people. The effervescence and dogmatism of some of our present-day cults of religion might be reduced to something nearer sanity, if their devotees would remember that the vapourings of their subliminals are not of necessity the decrees of the Almighty.

What we have now to consider, however, is the reverse of that order. Granted that a theory seems by

every other test of theories sound, does it stand the further test of our own experience? The scientific experts, who go chasing calories in test-tubes, may prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that an unemployed man can live a healthy life on five shillings a week, but the woman who has to hunt the shops for cheap remains, and to try to discover those calories in fat bacon-ends and battered vegetables and damaged fruit, knows that the theory will not work out in fact. The Christian Scientist can prove in his morocco-bound gilt-edged volumes the sovereignty of mind over matter so conclusively that you are convinced that there is no such thing as pain, but the next time you visit the dentist you will still make sure to ask for an anæsthetic. The Russellite may be able to give you absolute Scripture authority for assuring you that 'millions now living will never die', but in the ultimate you will both find that you will have to take your turn in 'shuffling off this mortal coil'. A Frenchman was being kept at bay by a fierce-looking dog. 'It's all right,' the owner of the dog assured him, 'the dog will not bite you. I know he won't.' 'Oui, oui,' replied the Frenchman, 'you know ze dog vill not bite. I know 'e vill not bite. But ze dog, do 'e know 'e vill not bite?' By every reason and argument of the theologian it may be proved beyond contradiction that my primitive instincts are so transformed that I will not bite, however much I may be provoked. You may tantalize me beyond endurance, but I shall not flare up in anger. You may persecute me and despitefully use me, and I shall pray for you. You may hate me, but I shall love you. You may smite me on the one cheek and I will turn the other. I shall be peaceful and glad, long-suffering and patient,

pure in word and deed, and fruitful in every other virtue. I may be that, I may do those things, according to the theory of the evangel. The people who have instructed me in the way of salvation know that I can be trusted to behave so. Other people whom I might injure know it. But do I know it? After all, that is an important consideration. It is more to the point that the dog knows he will not bite than that other people should believe it. It is more important that I should know the regeneration of my own nature than that the theories and speculations of other people prove that it is so.

How can we know, beyond all question, that the redeeming power of the gospel is active and effective in our own lives?

In the first place we know it because, as John Wesley put it, our hearts are strangely warmed. I think we had better here have his own words. 'In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.' The language is simple and clear, so that it may seem presumptuous to suggest any recasting. Perhaps it will be sufficient if we put our own experience in our own way. When we have faced up to the question of getting right with God, we have had to acknowledge that it brought nothing but misery and discontent. How could we straighten things out? We

worked out the account of our life on balance, but the balance was dead against us. We alternately repressed our memory of our wrong-doings, pushing them down into the dark regions of the subconscious and hastily securing the trap-doors, and refreshed our memory bringing our sins out to the light of day and hoping that they were not too scandalous. Sometimes we hoped that God might so far take notice of us as to deal gently with us. At other times we hoped we might get lost in the crowd on the principle of 'Heaven for comfort, hell for company'.

Still, we yearned for comfort, for the comforting knowledge that things were right between God and ourselves. But that was an incredible proposition, an impossible hope. And there we stood, and should for ever stand, if not like Bunyan's pilgrim with a burden on our backs, at least with a cloud over our spirits. Then came the astounding news that God had taken the matter in hand and had squared the account by a higher process than that of mathematics, confounding all philosophies and outdoing all ethics. He had shown us in Jesus Christ how good goodness can be, and in His cross how great love can be. He gave us in that moment a glimpse of grace. Our sins melted away in the warmth of His love as clouds before the sun, and we felt the encompassing warmth as of a sunny summer day about our hearts.

That warming of the heart is a solid memory upon which to base our conviction. We may have had many a clouded day since, thanks to our own faithlessness and shortcomings, but we can always hark back to that soul-refreshing experience as a thing no man can deny. It was ours, and will for ever be.

THE WITNESS OF OUR OWN SPIRIT

What we have felt and seen
With confidence we tell,
And publish to the sons of men
The signs infallible.

We who in Christ believe
That He for us hath died,
We all His unknown peace receive
And feel His blood applied.

Exults our rising soul,
Disburdened of our load,
And swells unutterably full
Of glory and of God.

If that warming of the heart is not enough, we can point to the fact that life from that moment took on a new slant for us. Isabel Cameron has a lovely little story of a young Scotch minister, fresh from his five-year course at college, prepared to attack his work as one who knows his job. In the course of his duties he meets a very practical girl who asks him, 'Do they teach everything at college?' The answer to that question does not come until the end of the story. The Reverend Colin Chisholm found that there were many things that were not taught at college, but particularly there was one thing which, perhaps, they could not be expected to teach. 'And I *do* suppose', Rosemary asked him again, 'they teach everything in the college?' 'They don't teach anything worth knowing in the college,' he cried, 'they don't tell us of the magic in a girl's hair.' And so, 'Hand-in-hand Rosemary and Colin went along the sunlit path, and it seemed to them as if the world was all new. They were facing a new world and a sunny way. If there were shadows—well—even so they were facing them together'.

'It seemed to them as if the world was all new.' That would probably have seemed a frivolous illustration to Wesley, who counselled his helpers, 'Speak sparingly with women, especially young women', but we may dare to employ it. It would obviously be a perfectly useless proceeding to try to persuade that young couple that life had not changed for them, that no new slant had come to them, that all was an illusion. They would sooner persuade themselves that you and I were illusions. If they are too ecstatic a couple, you may be more impressed by that cool, calm, and collected young person, Miss Vera Brittain, who closes her *Testament of Youth* with these words of quiet conviction: 'As I went up to him and took his hands, I felt that I had made no mistake. I found it not inappropriate that the years of frustration, and grief, and loss of work, and conflict, and painful resurrection, should have led me through their dark and devious ways to this new beginning.' If something more mature is desired as indicating that the experience is a lasting one, it will not be difficult to find abundant testimonies.

There is at least some justification for finding a parallel to the assurance of our conviction of the reality of our salvation in these directions in the fact that, to Wesley, with all his distrust of the witchery of woman-kind, true religion is the religion of the heart. He falls himself into the lyrical language of the lover: 'He is so joined unto the Lord as to be one spirit. His soul hangeth upon Him and chooseth Him as altogether lovely, "the chiefest among ten thousand". He knoweth, he feeleth what that means, "My beloved is mine, and I am his". "Thou art fairer than the children of men; full of grace are thy lips, because

God hath anointed thee for ever”.’ We may not express our experience in the same terms but it amounts to the same thing. It may be that our ‘heart leaps up when we behold a rainbow in the sky’. It may be the story of another’s love that rekindles our own. It may be the reaction to the coldness of another’s refusal of God’s love that fans the dying embers of our love into a flame. It may be some dire experience of sorrow or of desposal on the part of our fellows—‘Jesus, I my cross have taken’—that has drawn us to His side. It may be that the shallowness of earthly joys has led us to the deeper joy of His love again. It may have been the sharing of confidences. It may have been the solitary fellowship of the midnight hour. It may have been the feast of fellowship at that table which peculiarly sets forth His love. What does it matter how our hearts have thrilled to the beat of His heart. The one thing that matters is that they have thrilled again and again, and life has been a different thing.

But of more importance in the way of assurance than the warming of our hearts, or the new slant we have on life, is the fact that we behave as those who love God, and we know that we behave so. So now we come back to the questions: ‘Will we bite if someone annoys us? Will we turn the other cheek if we are smitten? Is there a prayer in our hearts for those who are as spiteful as cats? Are we the masters of ourselves?’ These are pertinent questions and only our own conscience can give us the answer. Are we delivering the goods? It may be worth noticing *en passant* that Wesley shows a healthy indifference to the criticisms of other people. He does value the example which every Christian ought to show to the world, but he does not suggest that the

world's testimony is of any importance in deciding whether we are behaving as we ought or not. So we are saved from that utter futility of doing things 'to be seen of men'. We are to trust our conscience, and there is comfort in that. Not that our conscience is likely to be complaisant. It is often an uncomfortable bedmate and an unpleasant fellow-traveller. But we forget what a quiet, easeful companion it can be. Its approval is so often silent that we have to look carefully to assure ourselves that it is still there. For, to a Christian, even conscience is a changed thing. Its function is different because our relation to God is different. When you are a son living in joyous fellowship with your father conscience has a very different aspect from that which it wears when you are a criminal fleeing from justice. It is no longer an accusing finger: it is a faithful mentor. It may even comfort when others accuse. *Punch* has a picture of a small boy, looking on with apparent misgiving while his father peruses his school report, and venturing the hopeful observation, 'I don't know how it strikes you, Dad, but it seems to me we have ground for a libel action'. It was a brave resort, but a perfectly natural one, for if it is true, as Wesley reminds us, that the judge is always supposed to be on the side of the prisoner, it is truer still that a father is always supposed to be on the side of his child. At any rate, this is the aspect of the conscience which we are now considering. It is the assurance we have that even if our report does not come up to our Father's expectations, nevertheless we are fundamentally on His side and He is on ours. The very fact that conscience means that to us is a convincing proof of our changed relationship. For, let us

remember, we are not dealing with a thing that can be trifled with. We are under no temptation to stifle our conscience, yet we do not come under the condemnation that 'conscience doth make cowards of us all'.

So far, indeed, from wanting to stifle conscience, we prefer to know that it is wide awake, alert and full of vigour. The more efficient it is the better for our health of soul. When we suspect that anything is wrong on the physical side we do not want the doctor in casual fashion to feel our pulse and look at our tongue and to assure us that all is well. We want him to use the most delicate instruments that science can devise to read our blood-pressure and record the beating of our hearts, and to look through the inwardness of our being and to give us fair warning if anything is beginning to go wrong. It is such sensitivity, such discrimination, such searching of the inward parts, that we require of our conscience.

Quick as the apple of an eye,
O God, my conscience make;
Awake my soul when sin is nigh,
And keep it still awake.

Now all this argues for a redirected nature. It is not the way of the unsaved to crave for a tender conscience. Their whole purpose in life is to deaden conscience and to stifle its voice. A rebellious schoolboy is vividly aware of the strength of his own desire to get away from school and everything connected with it. He does not worry about his teacher's concern for him. If he gives any thought to that unpleasant person it is only to regret that the time has not arrived for contributing a copper for a wreath for him. Such a boy would find it difficult

to persuade himself that he was in any sense a hopeful example of the teacher's success in producing men and women after the desire of his own heart. But even a dunce who wants to get on, however unpromising his efforts may be, however many sums he may get wrong, and however many mistakes he may make in spelling, knows that he is in the truest sense a part of his teacher's programme. And that scholar who wants to find in himself a keen critical sense of his own efforts, so that he will not be satisfied with his work until he knows that that work will find the approval of his teacher because it has first satisfied his own judgement, has a conviction of co-operation that nothing can shake. Such a process of reasoning has its parallel in the realm of religion. The man who follows the way of his own will and turns his back upon God may well try to persuade himself that there is no God. Dr. Jowett said of the man in the psalm, who said in his heart 'there is no God', that he did so because he did not want God. This man will, of course, realize that he is no hopeful example of God's desire to produce men and women after the lust of His own mind. But the veriest dunce in spiritual things, the most intractable being who wants to turn and train his instincts in the right direction, however unsuccessful his efforts may be, knows beyond a peradventure that he is the object of God's redeeming grace.

One who is all unfit to count
 As scholar in Thy school,
 Thou of Thy love hast named a friend—
 O kindness wonderful!

No misgiving of our personal worth can withstand the assurance of that relationship:

If there is aught of worth in me,
It comes from Thee alone;
Then keep me safe, for so, O Lord,
Thou keepest but Thine own.

And he, who, quick to learn, skilful in directing his energies into the channels of virtue and service, is anxious to find his sternest critic in himself, who will not offer to his Lord anything but that which earns his own grudging approval, has an assurance that he is working with God which will admit of no doubt.

We started out with the idea of Adam Bede that the aim and purpose of doctrine is to give names to our feelings, to, so to speak, examine our subjective emotions and then invent a kind of card-index system to fit them. Perhaps we are now in a position to realize that the card-index system is already there, and to find in our own experience the corresponding evidence. In any case, it is well to know that the inwardness of our feelings and the outwardness of God's salvation are as the image in the glass and the beholder's face. 'The Spirit Himself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.'

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. 'Methodism is the religion of experience.' Are there any limits to the value of experience as a ground of belief?
2. Why was John Wesley's heart strangely warmed? Have you had a similar experience?
3. 'Where is the blessedness I knew
When first I saw the Lord'?
If it has gone, how can it be recovered?
4. How far is the judgement of other people upon our lives of value to us?
5. What is a Christian conscience and how does it differ from the conscience of an unbeliever?
6. But what of our own unworthiness? Is it a denial of the work of grace?

VI

THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

'The Testimony of the Spirit is an inward impression on the souls of believers, whereby the Spirit of God directly testifies to their spirit, that they are children of God.'

JOHN WESLEY. Sermon on 'The Witness of the
Spirit'

VI

THE WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

You will remember that when Bunyan's Christian came to the house of Interpreter, he was told by Goodwill that Interpreter would show him 'excellent things, such as would be helpful to him on his journey'. Among those excellent things the most helpful was the most difficult fact to spot. Interpreter showed him a fire which was burning against a wall. Standing by it was one who was always pouring water on it to quench it. Yet the fire burned higher and hotter. 'The fire', said Interpreter, 'is the work of grace that is wrought in the heart: he that casts water upon it to extinguish it and put it out is the Devil; but in that thou seest the fire notwithstanding burn higher and hotter, thou shalt also see the meaning of that.' So he took Christian around to the other side of the wall, where another man stood with a vessel in his hand out of which he poured into the fire, not water but oil, secretly. 'This is Christ,' says Interpreter, 'who continually with His grace, maintains the work already begun in the heart. . . . And in that thou sawest that the man stood behind the wall to maintain the fire; this to teach thee that it is hard for the tempted to see how this work of grace is maintained in the soul.'

That illustration may help to convey to us the difficulty of discovering the explanation of some of the most helpful influences in our lives. John Wesley

spotted one such fact, but where Bunyan set his discovery forth with a revealing flash of the imagination, Wesley established his in laborious fashion by the weight of reasoned argument. At times one is tempted to wish that he had followed the method of Bunyan, but when one considers how much hangs upon the fact, it gives room for gratitude that he chose the more reliable way of reason. The dreamer so often sees what he wants to see and hence is uncritical of the substance of his visions; the thinker cannot be content but with sober fact.

The fact which Wesley spotted was what he described in scriptural language as the Witness of God's Spirit confirming our own conviction (the testimony of our own spirit) that we are the children of God. All this business of having things put right between ourselves and God, of finding a new slant on life, of being elevated to the rank of princes, and of delivering the goods in the realm of service is all very well, but is there any guarantee for it beyond the approval of our own conscience and the fact that it is a workable theory of life? 'How can a sinner know his sins on earth are forgiven?'

It has been an accepted teaching of the Church for many centuries, and it is so still in the Roman Church, that he cannot for certainty know any such thing. The Council of Trent said, 'No one can know with a certainty of faith which cannot be subject to illusion that he has obtained the grace of God'. When Wesley's followers claimed the knowledge that their sins were forgiven, it was the Church people who objected. In his *Journal* he relates of Edward Greenfield, 'I asked a little gentleman of St. Just what objection there was

to Edward Greenfield. He said, "Why the man is well enough in other things; but his impudence the gentlemen cannot bear. Why, sir, he says he knows his sins are forgiven".'

John Wesley found a ground for this assurance in the Witness of the Spirit. We shall find it in terms more akin to the ways of thought and language of our day if we look at the fact that there is a warmth, a glow, a flame of fire in our hearts, that is not of our kindling, and contemplating that remarkable fact, we spot the further fact that it was kindled and is kept alive by God. Here Wesley's analysis goes further than Bunyan's imagination. The latter stopped short at the realization that the work of grace in the heart of man is kept alive by Christ. Wesley goes on to discover that the fire itself is kindled by the Spirit of God. The work of grace is not only sustained by divine help, it is begun by divine initiative. That is the most helpful fact in the Christian life and it is still more helpful when we know what it is.

Whene'er a noble deed is wrought,
 Whene'er is spoken a noble thought,
 Our hearts, in glad surprise,
 To higher levels rise.

Every one knows how true that is. Our hearts never outgrow their surprise at their own goodness, and the very knowledge of our achievements brings a glow of warmth into our being. Theodore Dreiser portrays in *Elihu Burridge* a man who might so easily be ourselves, because he is so beset by human frailty. But Elihu had his times of exaltation. 'Do you still visit the poor and afflicted, as you once did?' I asked him. 'Yes, sir.'

‘Well you’ll get your reward for that.’ ‘I’ve had my reward. Every hand that’s been lifted to receive the little I had to offer has been my reward. I remember once going to a lonely woman here on New Year’s Day and taking her a little something—basket of grapes or fruit of some kind it was. I was stopping a minute—never stay long, you know; just run in and say, “Happy New Year”, leave what I have and get out—and so said, “Good morning, Aunt Mary”.

“Good morning, Elihu”, says she.

“Can’t stay long, Aunt Mary”, I said, “just want to leave you these”. Well, sir, you know, I was just turning around and starting when she caught hold of my sleeve and says, “Elihu Burr ridge,” she says, “give me that hand!” And do you know, before I knew what she was doing she took it up to her lips and kissed it! Yes, she did—kissed my hand. “Now”, he said, drawing himself up with eyes bright with intense feeling, “you know whether I’ve had my reward or not”.

A shock of that kind is a revelation to our doubting minds of the reality of the work of grace in our hearts, and we do not need the kissing of our hands, or any outward expression of appreciation, to produce a glow of satisfaction. This surely argues the existence of hidden fires, which may smoulder because we neglect them, but which brighten at every entrance of a fresh supply of air.

If Paul could say to Timothy, ‘Stir up the gift that is in thee’, we may with advantage apply the same language to one another in reference to the fire that too often is allowed to subside within us. Apart from the added good that may be accomplished by us under such incitement, there is in it the added assurance of

our own salvation. I have before me a letter which I have just received from an old friend. He says, 'I need something to cheer me up spiritually, for I get very low, and feel everybody is saved and safe but me'. I don't know of any better word to offer to that man than to bid him 'stir up the fire that is in him'; for I am as sure it is in him, as he is sure it is in other people. We need not be afraid to take this line of thought for fear of spiritual pride. Surprise at our own goodness might lead us, like little Jack Horner, in that direction; but the realization that it is all of God's grace will keep us from that.

We make a great deal of our fears of hidden fires, which we suspect may be burning within our hearts to no good purpose. Ought we not to rejoice more readily in the reality and strength of the fire that is there for good? 'Some one once told me', writes Elinor Mordaunt in *The Dark Fire* (it may or it may not be true but it touched my imagination), 'that there are long-closed mines where fires still smoulder on and on through the years, faintly fanned by some unguessed-at draught which reaches them through some primal fissure in the earth, fires that are still ready to break into flames, darken the sky with smoke, flare to heaven, if by any chance they are broken open. I believe we are all more or less like that, all with our buried fires.' She goes on to indicate the fears which are associated in her mind with those buried fires. I am not going to deny that the existence of evil in our nature may be fairly illustrated in that way. But the illustration can even more fitly be used to indicate the grace of God, which because it is 'prevenient grace', precedes and produces all our goodness.

What is still more to the point is, that this fire is not there to be quenched, but to be kept burning bright. Let us confess, going back to Bunyan's picture at the House of Interpreter, that not only is the Devil always pouring water on it to extinguish it but that we ourselves are often guilty of doing little to thwart him. But as Bunyan points to the reason for the failure of the Devil in his efforts as an amateur fireman, so Wesley bids us rejoice in the knowledge that it is God who has kindled this inextinguishable fire in our hearts. It is there, and it should be burning brightly and steadily, its warmth pervading our whole being.

This inner fire must not be confounded with the comfort of a good conscience. That is our evidence; this is His. They both support and amplify one another. 'The Spirit beareth witness with our spirit.' For that we can be truly thankful. We might doubt either of them separately. It is impossible to doubt both together. When the conscience is clear and the heart is warm we have as conclusive a proof as it is possible to have.

Nor must we confuse this divine warmth with a natural optimism. Oliver Goldsmith tells us in *The Vicar of Wakefield* of one who had a 'knack of hoping' which enabled its possessor to rely upon the Wheel of Fortune to bring better times. The lower that wheel sinks the surer is the upward trend of events to be near. Wesley did not mind wishing people 'Good luck, in the name of the Lord', and thereby showed a surer appreciation of the facts of life than some of his followers. But he was far from confusing such good fortune with the witness of the Spirit.

Neither is that witness to be confused with a noisy exuberance. At Newark, just over a hundred years

ago, a good Methodist named William Lockwood was preaching in the open air when the town fire-engine was made to play upon him, as though he had been a conflagration, until, half-drowned, he could but gurgle 'you can't quench the fire within'. That is all right if it really was the fire of God to which he was referring and not any of those 'strange flames' which Wesley prayed might be removed far from his heart. A marked feature of the Methodist Revival was the appearance of untamed enthusiasm and fervid oratory. That was to be expected in such circumstances when men at one step passed over from a life of wickedness and debauchery to a life of love and liberty in the favour of God. But we must not confuse this exuberance with the 'holy flame, heavenly fire' which Wesley guarded carefully, and which burns steadily to-day in thousands of quiet hearts. Too many are apt to regard the wild flames of unrestrained emotion as the essence of Methodism. Those flames will probably reappear whenever the circumstances in which they flourish return. But the warm heart, which is of the essence of Methodism, will flourish without such accidental manifestations. It is an inner warmth and the outward signs of it will depend upon peculiarities of time and place and person.

It evidently needs a fine discrimination and perchance a modicum of scientific method to establish the identity of this inner warmth. A mother who was unused to the ways of the clinical thermometer took her child's temperature and sent an urgent message to the doctor, 'Please come at once. Bertie's temperature is 120'. The doctor did not come but he sent a reply, 'I can do nothing. You had better send for the fire-

brigade'. Perhaps it was some such misreading of the symptoms that led the opponents of William Lockwood to imagine that what was needed was a fire-engine. Rough-and-ready estimates of the temperature of the heart may be very misleading. A hearty 'sing' in a great assembly may seem to betoken a high temperature of the inner life; it may only indicate surface heat. A quiet, bashful temperament may be thought to betoken a low level of devotion; it may be a screen which covers an ardent store of enthusiasm. We need to exercise a careful judgement, and to see that our method of investigation is scientific, if we are to arrive at the true temperature of the inner life of our fellow Methodists. As Mrs. Herman says, 'Our greed for that sensible warmth of religious feeling miscalled "experience" in some quarters, is one of our most dangerous enemies'.

And if our desire is to assess the amount of assurance of God's grace there is in a particular Church, or in the whole Methodist Church, the same wise discrimination is required. The Steward who answered the President's inquiry 'How are you doing here?' with, 'Fairly well. The Envelope System has saved us', may have been observing one healthy indication of the warmth of the inner fire. The collections may, of course, be a very unreliable guide, but on the other hand, they may be a most reliable one. It takes as much grace to give generously as it does to pray eloquently, and so far as the gifts of Methodist people are evidence of a desire to translate the warmth of the heart into the energy that speeds the feet of the heralds of the Cross they are surely a reliable guide to the extent of their devotion. John Wesley had a way of being very outspoken with people who were found

lacking when this gauge was applied to their spiritual state. A car may be making a lot of noise without covering much ground and without possessing any great reserve of power, or it may eat up the miles and career over the hills in almost dead silence. On the other hand it may be silent because it has conked out. One man's energy runs more naturally to service and another's to worship, but both may be equally aware of a warmth at the heart. One may be voluble and easy in his approach to his neighbour, and another may be tongue-tied and diffident; and a Church may have so great a preponderance of the one sort that we may long for a better balance, but that should not unduly depress us. Another Church may profit by our surplus and we may rejoice in its overplus. One of the advantages of a Connexional Church is that it gains on the roundabouts what it loses on the swings, and so shares in all the fun of the fair. It knows how to pool the energies of the warmed heart.

This leads on to the truth so admirably and vividly expressed by the President of the Conference (Rev. C. Ensor Walters) in his New Year Message: 'Our Church does not express a dull formalism. Like red-hot steel, it adapts itself to the channels through which it flows, and moulds itself to meet the needs of each new age. Its spirit remains the same.' That is a fact worth spotting, especially if we remember that in the background is the further fact that that Church is composed of tens of thousands of individuals whose hearts, like those of the Founder of Methodism, are strangely warmed. Not one in a thousand has analysed his experience, not one in a thousand would recognize it for what Wesley called the 'Witness of the Spirit'. Few

would know that what has taken place in their hearts could be set forth picturesquely in the parable of the fire at Interpreter's house. Yet all would react to the challenge with which Tennyson met the doubts of cold reason :

If e'er when faith had fallen asleep,
I heard a voice 'believe no more',
A warmth within the breast would melt
The freezing reason's colder part,
And like a man in wrath the heart
Stood up and answered, 'I have felt'.

So, however different such experiences may seem on the surface, they arise from the same deep convictions, and originate in the same fact which lies back of all our lives, that God Himself is the source of our salvation. *The Roadmender* says, 'There is always a little fire of wood on the open hearth in the kitchen when I get home at night; the old lady says it is "company" for her and sits in the lonely twilight, her knotted hands lying quiet on her lap, her listening eyes fixed on the burning sticks. I wonder sometimes whether she hears music in the leap and lick of the fiery tongues. . . . Surely she hears some voice!' If in the days of our pilgrimage we find an occasional quiet hour in which, as it were, we can sit beside our inner fire, we may with the eyes of doubt see only the evil which is busy trying to quench our fire, and guess only at the activity of the Unseen One who pours oil on the flames in secret, but we, too, shall hear a voice, as Wesley did when he brooded over the fire in the company of Paulus Gerhardt, which speaks to our souls and says, 'I am thy Love, thy God, thy All'.

We have seen the value of our experience of the warmed heart, supported by the undoubted fact that

life has taken a new slant, and by the knowledge that our instincts are tamed. It is not too much to say that those grounds of assurance are made doubly and more than doubly sure by the fact that the warmth is not produced by the spontaneous combustion of our own emotions, but by a flame of heavenly love kindled on the mean altar of our hearts. Nor is the existence of that hidden fire any the less sure in that it requires some insight, and reason, and above all the listening ear, to discover it. It is well worth the effort of a little concentration to hear the leap and lick of those flames. It is the indubitable evidence of God's work in our hearts.

In joy of inward peace, or sense
Of sorrow over sin,
He is His own best evidence,
His witness is within.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Compare and contrast Wesley and Bunyan in their view of the operation of grace in the heart of the believer.
2. 'How can a sinner know
His sins on earth forgiven?'
3. How do you distinguish between 'a good conscience' and 'the witness of the Spirit'?
4. What indications of the genuineness of religious experience would you expect to find in other people?
5. 'Our Church does not express a dull formalism.' What saves it from that fate?



VII

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

'Love hath purified his heart from envy, malice, wrath and every unkind temper. It has cleansed him from pride. He prays without ceasing. . . . In this he is never hindered, much less interrupted, by any person or thing. In retirement or company, in leisure, business or conversation, his heart is ever with the Lord. Whether he lie down or rise up, God is in all his thoughts: he walks with God continually, having the loving eye of his soul fixed on Him, and everywhere seeing Him that is invisible.'

JOHN WESLEY, 'The Character of a Methodist'
(Works, viii)

VII

CHRISTIAN PERFECTION

A CONVERSATION which ranged over a wide variety of subjects finally centred upon a young minister who had just been appointed to a new charge. 'He has struck twelve,' said one of the party, 'there is nothing better for him to get.' That was true in a sense, but the minister in question was conscious of something else. He knew that he had just set his hand to a task in which, to continue the figure, he had yet to strike one, to say nothing of striking twelve. That may help us to recognize one great difference between the idea of Christian perfection as it appeared to Wesley and his contemporaries and as it appears to us. To Wesley the clock stopped at twelve: to us it goes on to a new reckoning. To them the Christian life meant a steady movement, a gradual growth in goodness from conversion to entire sanctification, at which point the movement necessarily stopped. They had struck twelve. There was nothing more to strike. To us any attainment of which we are by the grace of God capable only opens up the challenge to go on and on to all eternity.

True, Wesley spoke of a possible growth in grace even after entire sanctification had been attained, but at most such growth seems to have been limited to the exercise of a little in the nature of variety of virtues, within what was already a finished state. The *wanderlust* in our nature forbids us to call a halt, and the

character of the Christian life accords with that deep-rooted desire. I once arrived at a seaside resort with my family for a holiday. We had only found our way to the station exit when my wife's eager eye caught sight of a business-like array of motor-coaches drawn up in the adjoining yard like a crowd of greyhounds on the alert. 'Put your luggage down', she said, 'and let us see where these coaches go to.' So we ascertained the destinations, fares, and times of departure, and betook ourselves to our rooms with the comforting conviction that this was not a stopping-place alone but a starting-point for further adventures. Most of us would feel about any attainment which promised to end in a *state*, that it had no power of satisfying us, and any life in heaven or earth which offered no scope for further effort would be little better than purgatory. In my boyhood days we used to sing at Band of Hope a chorus in praise of such a heaven:

O what must it be to be there!

but I must confess that, like Huckleberry Finn, 'I couldn't see any advantage in it and made up my mind not to try for it'. The same observation applies to the state of any and all of the people I have ever known who claim to be perfect Christians or to live by absolutes of any kind. Such a conception of perfection inevitably leads to Pharisaism. It does more. It removes us effectively from the company of our fellow men, and that is fatal to all real goodness. Robert Lynd says: 'I am willing to admit that if people were perfect saints, like St. Francis of Assisi, they would have no time for films, cards or dancing. They would be indifferent to most of our amusements—even to cricket and

knock-knock. They would be absorbed in other and more serious things. This does not mean, however, that these things are sinful for ordinary human beings. It means merely that saints can do without most of the innocent recreations that help to make life pleasanter for ordinary people.' But Mr. Lynd has got it all wrong. It might have done for Francis of Assisi. It might have done for Wesley and his fellows. It may even do for some folk who think they are saints to-day. But it simply will not do for a modern Christian who wants to live up to his religion. He has no right to cultivate a superiority to any innocent recreation, as though his refusal to share in it was a virtue. Even Wesley, who claimed to be a man of one book, the Bible, read Shakespeare to the end of his life, and was all the better a man for it. The man who would be a perfect Christian to-day must be perfect in his use of recreation and amusement, and even a President of the Conference might find some new agility of mind as well as refreshment of spirit in a game of knock-knock. And many an adipose addict of entire sanctification might with advantage to the curves of his *corpus vile* trip the light fantastic toe.

But, of course, it is not there alone that the perfect Christian must master life. He has to master it also in the realm of work. There are limits in the world of pleasure, limits of time and limits of the kinds of pleasure, which every one must decide for himself. There are limits too in the realm of work, and these are mostly decided for us. But most of us can find scope in our work for perfecting our personality in some direction or another. The early Methodists could aim at and perhaps attain a kind of perfection in their

religious life which bore no relation at all to their workaday world. They simply ruled out 'the world' as the realm of the Devil, which they had unfortunately to share with him. They inhabited it, however, only diffidently, and feared its pleasures as much as they abhorred its vices. They knew that the Devil wanted to be good to them and to give them a good time; but they would have none of it. To-day, however, he who fails to express his religion in the realm of work and business fails utterly. In fact, wherever the modern Christian has to do with the world of men and things, he has to work out the implications of his religion; and to do that perfectly is no mean achievement.

Having recognized that fact, we may turn back and remind ourselves of the need for every one who thinks of becoming perfect in the Christian life to face up to the task of cultivating his own soul. This belongs to the beginning, middle and ending of all virtue. 'Let man, then, learn', says Emerson, 'the revelation of all nature, and all thought to his heart; this, namely, that the Highest dwells with him; that the sources of nature are in his own mind, if the sentiment of duty is there. But if he would know what the great God speaketh, he must "go into his closet and shut the door" as Jesus said. . . . He must greatly listen to himself, withdrawing himself from all the accents of other men's devotions. Their prayers even are harmful to him until he have made his own. . . . He that finds God a sweet, enveloping thought to him, never counts his company.'

So far we have been looking at the background against which we are to see the figure of the man who moves towards the perfection in the Christian life to-day. He will be a moving figure, ever moving

onward, attaining a lesser perfection and perceiving a higher in the very moment of achieving. But always his movement will be an unfolding, a development of character in the whirl of Vanity Fair and in the ceaseless rush of business and commerce and industry, and in the worship and the service of the sanctuary.

There can be no question of living a Christian life to oneself. 'The Christian graces and virtues', says Dr. Garvie, 'are not to be exercised in a social vacuum but in a great variety of personal relations,' in the home, at school, in work, at leisure, in civic life, in the Church, and in national and international spheres. One of the most interesting features of modern Christianity is the richness and variety of the religious life as seen against a wide diversity of backgrounds. The Home Mission Reports of the Methodist Church supply an unending stream of illustrations of what living a Christian life means in the Army or the Navy, in the University, in the slums, in the depressed areas, and the new areas, or in rural districts. It means one thing to be a Christian to the man who has been converted in prison and has to face the problem of managing a jobless existence in an unforgiving world; it is another thing to 'stand up for Jesus' in a barrack room; and still another to manifest the grace of God when the Means Test Man comes to probe the private affairs of the family. Obviously the working out of Christian duty is a far different thing to the woman who is trying to make both ends meet on the Old-Age Pension, and to the man who complains that money is pouring in so fast that he does not know where to invest it. No easy way out is possible in these days, when so much of the background, different though it may be from that of

others, is determined for us. We cannot step out of our surroundings, nor can we forget them or disregard them, as the early Methodists did, and concentrate on the devotional life.

That being so, it follows that anything in the way of perfection that we can obtain is perfection in those surroundings. The East-ender must attain his perfection without cultivating a B.B.C. accent, and the Oxford graduate will attain it without dropping his drawl. If the footballer is to achieve it, it must above everywhere be on the football field. A First League player of my acquaintance always retires to his room before every game to pray that he may play the game as a Christian should. One would like to feel that we all do the same before some things that we regard as of infinitely more importance than a football match. The perfection of a business man is not to be assessed by his emotion when he is holding a hymn-book and yearning for the Spirit of Holiness to possess his heart, though that is not without significance, but by the honesty and integrity of his dealings, and the consideration with which he treats his employees and customers. And a minister will attain his perfection, not in the pulpit, though some of us need reminding that we should be attaining it there, but in all his personal and pastoral relations with his fellow-men and in all his contacts with men and things.

Professor John Hilton has just been saying over the air: 'It's a queer thing but everything I seem to touch in these talks turns out to be a far larger issue than I imagined.' Yet he has only been dealing with small isolated incidents and problems of our social life. Then how difficult must be the task of so living our whole life

that it can be said that we have accomplished it perfectly.

We may well ask ourselves if such a thing as perfection is possible under such conditions. Would not an abstractly perfect life be in the nature of a freak in our imperfect world? Would it not be so remote in possibility that there could be no challenge in it? We have all heard of the man who purchased an ostrich's egg and put it in his hen-coop, having first written on it, 'Keep your eye on this and do your best'. Poor hens! And poor us! if we are expected to perform such feats of moral elevation. But surely we are not required to live up to some abstract ideal of what the perfect man, perfect in body and mind and soul, would achieve in a perfect world.

Rather we are expected to be the best we can be, and to do the best we can do, in a world which is still in the making. We all have such severe limitations of mind that our goodness will be handicapped by want of knowledge. We have such limitations of body. Even St. Francis had to put up with 'Brother Ass', but to him the relationship was fraternal; with us it is a matter of identity, and though the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak. And we have such limitations of soul. A man who once saw his soul is said to have tried to kill it because he thought it was some noxious insect.

But it is demanded of us that we should be the best such creatures of limitation as we are can be, and to accomplish what such limited beings can. 'What can a little chap do?' He can't wear his father's trousers, or flap an angel's wings, but he can do whatever a little chap can do. And he can do greater things later on, if he will be patient and persistent. 'O God,'

prayed a little chap, 'make me like Jesus. Please do it now.' Of course God does not answer prayers like that. 'By little and little' God led the Israelites into the land of Canaan, and by little and little He still leads us into the Canaan of Perfect Love.

John Wesley said that the perfection at which the Christian can confidently aim is perfect love. We can find no wiser ideal to-day, but we can give to it a content that is more in accord with our modern outlook. Wesley says, 'Is there no sin in those who are perfect in love? I believe not. But, be that as it may, they feel none; no temper contrary to pure love, while they rejoice, pray, and give thanks continually. And whether sin is suspended or extinguished, I will not dispute. It is enough that they feel nothing but love'. That seems, in the language of the photographer, to 'lack clear definition'. In our day we like our outlines to be clear.

It is natural that we should love God because, as John puts it, He has first loved us. When we think of how, when we could do nothing to that end, He put things right between ourselves and Him; when we think of the new slant on life which has come to us; when we realize that He has adopted us as His children; when we behold what is the outcome of our new direction in life; and when we remind ourselves of the cost of all this; we can but love Him.

How shall I thank Thee for the grace
 On me and all mankind bestowed?
 O that my every breath were praise!
 O that my heart were filled with God!
 My heart would then with love o'erflow,
 And all my life Thy glory show.

The overflowing of the heart is spontaneous; but love, if it is truly love, is more than rhapsody. A lass likes to be told that she is loved, and would not miss for worlds the knowledge that her lover is elated over it. But beyond his crazy maunderings, she wants to know that the thought of a home is being built around her, and that he means to share his life with her on, at the lowest estimate, a fifty-fifty basis. A man may be thrilled at the discovery that the woman of his choice returns his love, but sooner or later he will want to be assured that the love which expresses itself in billing and cooing will equally find expression in darning his socks and cooking his dinners. A woman who was listening to the proposal of the man on whom her heart was set, but who had little to offer her beyond his talents and possibilities, showed her good sense and appreciation of the essentials of life. 'I have nothing to offer you', he said, 'but my love, yet I know that you have the right to ask more than that.' He was thinking of the material things of life but her thoughts were on things more essential. She replied: 'I have the right to ask and I do ask for more. I ask for co-operation, willingly given, in all things. I ask for an abiding interest in my life, and I ask for all your respect—and nothing more.'

If she had analysed the requirements of true love as a philosopher might she could not have improved on that. Those are the very things that God, because He loves us, requires of us if we love Him. If I may reverse the order in which she put them, God demands all our respect. All that He has done for us and all that He is doing, was achieved and is being achieved without anything that takes away from His majesty

and holiness. There is no slightest surrender of moral worth. Wonderful as His love would have been in any case, it is all the more wonderful in that it is the love of a King. Then, God demands our interest. If we love Him we shall be interested in all He does and in all He loves. And, finally, love inevitably leads to a share in His purposes. Dr. Newton Clarke has a phrase in his *Outline of Theology* which expresses this side of the truth admirably. It is: 'The fellowship of saviourhood.' God's purpose is that all men should know for themselves what we know of His saving grace. Our perfection is a small part in the realization of the ultimate perfection of all men in a perfect world. But, small though it is, it is a part, and it carries with it the requirement that our powers shall be fully used to that end.

If we bear in mind the fact that loving God means these three things we shall be slow to affirm that we have attained the ideal of perfect love. It is so easy to mistake the emotion and the ecstasy for the essence of that which best attests its genuineness by its sober fulfilment of our duty to God and man. Yet there is no other ideal which can satisfy the human mind. To any other way of life than the Christian way it must remain a hopeless ideal. The only issue, apart from Christianity, is to say with Browning:

Because I see, but cannot reach, the height
That lies for ever in the light,
I feel my feeble hands unclasp,
And sink discouraged into night.

Or, as Nijinski more tersely expresses it, 'I love God but I cannot do what He wants'. The Gospel of Jesus Christ does, however, bring perfection into the realm of

practical politics. The fact that God loves us and lifts us out of our despair into the joy of His fellowship; gives us the status of His children; places at our disposal all the resources of the nature which He created for Himself; allows us to find assurance in our own conscience and in the consciousness of His favour; and that He grants to us the vision of the graces of His desire appearing in our lives, and the service of His creatures prospering in our hands; all this gives us at least a hope that we may move towards the perfection He wills to work in us. That hope becomes more than hope when we remember that He places all the resources of His power at our disposal.

Perhaps the wisdom of John Wesley may be our wisdom too. He maintained that it is possible to achieve perfection. He allowed that others might have achieved it. But he refused to claim it for himself. A theological professor was asked by his students the familiar poser: Have you ever known a perfect Christian? He replied, 'Yes, I have known a few people of whom I could conscientiously say that they were perfect. But they did not know it'.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of the ideal of Christian perfection?
2. How does the difference in our attitude to the secular life of our time add to the difficulty of attaining perfection?
3. How would you define a perfect Christian?
4. What does 'perfect love' mean? Can one be perfect in love and imperfect in righteousness?
5. What does the fellowship of saviourhood mean to (a) a preacher; (b) a business girl; (c) a student?

**PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
BY WESTERN PRINTING SERVICES LTD., BRISTOL**



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JUL 10 1947 JUL 25 1947	C. Boley	
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